

Russkii as the New Rossiiskii? Nation-Building in Russia After 1991

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Abstract

Russia's post-1991 nation-building project has been torn between competing interpretations of national identity. Whereas the other former Soviet republics opted for nation-building centered on the titular nation, Russia's approach to national identity was framed by the fact that the RSFSR had been defined *not* as a designated national homeland but as a multi-ethnic federation. This, coupled with Russia's definition as the legal successor of the Soviet Union, suggesting continuity and a history of uninterrupted statehood, has enabled a range of rivaling understandings of how to define the "nation." Focusing on top-down official nation-building, this article examines how, against a backdrop of shifting political contexts, structural constraints, and popular attitudes, the Kremlin has gradually revised its understanding of what constitutes the "Russian nation." Four models for post-Soviet Russian nation-building are identified – the ethnic, the multi-national, the civic, and the imperial. Over time, the correlation of forces among these has shifted. The article concludes that, despite some claims of an ethno-nationalist turn after 2014, the Kremlin still employs nationalism instrumentally: National identity has undoubtedly become more *russkii*-centered, but, at the same time, the Kremlin keeps the definition of "Russianness" intentionally vague, blurring the boundaries between "nation" and "civilization."

Keywords: nation-building; Russia; Yeltsin; Putin; civilization

"Who are we?" "Who do we want to be?" These are questions that Russians have been asking themselves "more and more loudly," Putin told a gathering of international Russia experts at the Valdai Discussion Club in 2013 (Putin 2013). Today, some three decades after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russian nation-building and the formulation of a new national idea are still very much projects in the making (see, for example, Laruelle 2010a; Panov 2010; Shevel 2011; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2016; Teper 2016; Shcherbak and Sych 2017; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2018a; Laruelle 2018; Goode 2019; Malinova 2020). This article explores how various competing projects for Russian nation-building have unfolded and fared since 1991.

Nation-building processes are shaped and influenced by an array of actors and voices, and the focus of nation-building efforts can be both "top-down" and "bottom-up" (Wimmer 2018). Here, focus is on top-down official nation-building, on the official state narrative,¹ examining how, against a backdrop of shifting political contexts, structural constraints, and popular attitudes, the Kremlin has gradually revised its understanding of what constitutes the new Russian nation.²

The discussion is structured around four different models for how to define and delineate the post-Soviet Russian nation, models based on whether emphasis is primarily on civic, state-centered attributes or the more narrowly defined ethnic characteristics of the nation.³ Variants of all four can

be found in the public nation-building discourse, although the correlation of forces among them has shifted over time. Sometimes the Kremlin has promoted an understanding of the nation that is close to one of these models; more often though, it has pursued a combination of elements taken from different models. In addition, the article discusses how “civilization” as a higher-order identity category gradually has come to (partially) overlap with “nation” in the Kremlin’s nation-building discourse.

After first briefly discussing how the preconditions for Russian nation-building differed from those of the projects pursued by the elites of other former Soviet republics, I present the four models: the multi-ethnic, ethnic, civic, and imperial Russian nation – as well as a civilizational add-on. Next, the article discusses the strategies pursued by the Kremlin, dividing the post-Soviet period into four distinct phases. Finally, I examine where the Russian nation-building project stands today.

Competing Models for Russian Nationhood

The preconditions for nation-building in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union differed significantly from those in the other former Union republics.

First, the territorial forerunner of today’s Russian Federation, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), was *not a designated national homeland* but an ethnically neutral republic. All other Union republics bore the name of a particular ethnic group, the “titular nation,” and these republics were widely regarded by those who lived there as “belonging” to that specific group (Karklins 1986; Brubaker 1996). A common misunderstanding holds that ethnic Russians were the “titular nation” in the RSFSR. Indeed, ethnic Russians made up the vast majority of the RSFSR’s population; by the late Soviet period, they constituted more than 80 percent – a stronger ethno-demographic predominance than that enjoyed by the titular nations of most other Union republics. However, the first “R” in RSFSR did not stand for “*Russkii*” – the Russian word for “Russian” in the ethnic and cultural sense – but for “*Rossiiskii*” – an adjective derived from the pre-revolutionary name of Russia, *Rossiiskaia imperiia*, the Russian Empire. Not that this mattered much, as long as the USSR continued to exist. In the Soviet Union, Russian language and culture ruled supreme, not only in the RSFSR but in the other republics as well. This is one reason why few ethnic Russians developed an emotional attachment to the RSFSR or to any other specific republic. Instead, to a greater degree than most non-Russians, they identified with the Soviet Union as a whole as their “fatherland” (Kolstø 1999).

Second, the Russian Federation differs in *its long history of uninterrupted statehood and great-power tradition*. The fact that the first “R” in RSFSR stood for “*Rossiiskaia*” indicates the strong links between this particular republic and previous incarnations of Russian statehood. While many of the other Soviet successor states that were established in 1991 must be regarded as new state entities, the RSFSR could reasonably trace its history back to the Middle Ages. When the Bolsheviks came to power after the October Revolution, the first state they established was precisely the RSFSR, in 1918. The USSR came later – in 1922 – as more territories of the former tsarist state were brought under Moscow’s control. In a certain sense, therefore, the RSFSR, more than the other Union republics, is a direct continuation of the Russian Empire, and certainly of the Soviet Union: when the USSR fell apart, the RSFSR was internationally recognized as its legal successor.

In 1991, the RSFSR dropped three of the letters from its acronym and was renamed the Russian Federation, or simply RF – but it controls the same territory. Its 17,100,000 km² (Crimea excluded) make up more than 75 percent of the total territory of the former Soviet Union.⁴ Its enormous size, as well as the fact that Moscow inherited the Soviet Union’s nuclear arsenal and most of its conventional military capabilities, all serve to bolster Russia’s self-understanding as a great power. Unique among the post-Soviet successor states, Russia can aspire to a role in world politics. This has definite identity consequences for the populace.

Third, the RSFSR was a *multi-ethnic federation*. Some of the other Union republics in the Soviet Union – Azerbaijan, Georgia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan – included lower-level autonomies (autonomous republics and autonomous oblasts or provinces) each of which, just like the Union republic itself, had a titular nation. This arrangement, however, did not detract from the status of these Union republics as ethnic homelands for their titular group. Matters were very different with the RSFSR, which was formally and officially a federation. Indeed, the vast majority of lower-level ethnic autonomies in the USSR were located on RSFSR territory: 16 of the 20 autonomous republics, 5 of the 8 autonomous oblasts, and all of the 10 autonomous okrugs (districts). Unlike the RSFSR, these subordinated units were established as national homelands for a specific titular nation.⁵ This meant that the structure of the RSFSR in many ways replicated that of the USSR – with one major difference: whereas the USSR was a “complete” federation in the sense that the federal subjects covered the entire territory, the ethno-federal structure of the RSFSR was “incomplete,” with ethnic autonomies being interspersed with “regular” administrative entities.

This heritage framed the debate on national identity in Russia after the collapse of the USSR and was one reason why Russia’s post-Soviet nation-building process took a different course from the strategies adopted by the other former Soviet republics. Whereas the modal tendency in the non-Russian successor states was nationalization centered around the titular nation (Brubaker 1996; Smith, Law, Wilson, Bohr, and Allworth 1998; Kolstø 2000), ethnocentric ideas have not been equally dominant in the Russian discourse. Various other ideals and schemes have competed for primacy. At least four, partially overlapping, models of the “Russian nation” can be discerned:

1. *The multi-ethnic nation*. This model, the *mnogonatsional’nyi narod*, takes the ethno-federal structure of the Russian state as its starting point. Emphasizing the equal status of all ethnic groups represented in the state – at least those who have their own federal unit – this model, unsurprisingly enough, has been especially popular among the non-Russian minorities. Of the four models, it represents the greatest continuity with the Soviet approach to “the national question” (Malinova 2010, 94).
2. *The ethnic nation*. Although the Soviet legacy long hampered ethnicity-focused nation-building among the ethnic Russians (*russkie*), demands for recognition of the special role that ethnic Russians have played in Russian history and Russian state-building gradually became more salient. Russian ethno-nationalists deplore the fact that ethnic Russians are not a titular group in Russia and insist that this “mistake” should be rectified (Krylov 2012; Kolstø 2016a).
3. *The civic nation*. The concept of a purely civic nation – *grazhdanskaia natsiia* – represents a much clearer break with Soviet-era ideals (Tolz 1998, 1004). Soviet nation-builders had insisted on a dual identity – identification with both the Soviet state and the ethnic group. When communist ideology was discarded in the early 1990s, attempts were made to transplant Western constructivist-inspired ideas about the nation-state onto Russian soil, introducing the civic *rossiiane* identity (Tishkov 1995). However, this model has suffered somewhat from being associated with other Western ideals that were introduced at the same time, such as Western-style democracy and market economy, ideals that have increasingly been viewed with deep skepticism among the population.
4. *The imperial nation*. Just like in the case of the “multi-ethnic nation,” “the imperial nation” basically harks back to the Soviet era in how it envisages who should be incorporated in the national “us.” The terminological break is greater, however: at the time, only some dissidents, émigrés, and other detractors of the Soviet model had used the appellation “empire,” whereas today many of those nostalgic for Soviet times proudly describe the USSR as a mighty empire that they would like to see resurrected. Contemporary Soviet nostalgia – and the promotion of an imperial nation-model – is far less a hankering for a planned economy or the communist ideology than a question about reviving state power and reuniting lost territories and peoples (Pain 2016).⁶

Table 1. Competing models for the Russian nation

	Status quo-oriented	Potentially revisionist
Ethnically focused	Multi-ethnic	Ethnic
State-centered	Civic	Imperial

The first two of these four models emphasize the ethnic component in nation-building: in the first, with ethnicities in the plural; in the second, by highlighting the role of one particular ethnic group (see Table 1). By contrast, the third and the fourth models are primarily state-centered. Proponents of the third model take Russia's current borders as their starting point, whereas the fourth model is potentially expansionist. The latter model can thus also be described as revisionist, a characteristic it potentially shares with the second model, the ethnic nation. However, where the imperial nation is pursuing a greater "us" based on reunification of former imperial domains, proponents of the ethnic model may in some cases propagate a smaller state in which the borders fit better with the distribution of ethnic Russians (for example, by letting the North Caucasus leave).

The dichotomization of national identity into a civic and an ethnic version has drawn considerable criticism for its oversimplification of how nation-building processes play out in the real world (see Yack 1996; Kuzio 2002; Shulman 2002). In a post-Soviet Russian context, however, it makes sense to use the dichotomy as a prism through which to view and discuss the nation-building process, as the Russian authorities initially opted for emulating the Soviet practice of simultaneously promoting a civic state identity and ethnicizing individual identity.

While for a long time Russian national identity was discussed within the discursive field defined by these four models, the article also introduces a fifth model to capture the most recent developments in the Kremlin's nation-building discourse: "civilization." Henry E. Hale and Marlene Laruelle define civilization as "a macro identity category – often seen as inclusive of meso-level identity categories like ethnicity, nation, or country" (Hale and Laruelle 2021, 600). While Rogers Brubaker argues that "civilizational discourse refers to a different kind of imagined community, located at a different level of cultural and political space, than national discourse" (Brubaker 2017, 1211), in the Russian case, one might argue that the two are to a large extent conflated (see, for example, Verkhovsky and Pain 2012; Hale and Laruelle 2020).

In the following, I survey how the four models – and the civilizational add-on – have fared in official discourse since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Phase 1: Breaking with Empire (the 1990s)

The ethnic and the imperial nation models certainly had their proponents in the immediate aftermath of the break-up of the Soviet Union – but mostly within the opposition and fringe groups. The most famous – if not notorious – nationalist organization in the RSFSR under perestroika was Pamiat', a group with a clearly ethnocentric program. The same could be said about most of the groups that subsequently splintered off from Pamiat', including Russian National Unity, a neo-fascist militant group that attracted thousands of followers in the 1990s (Shenfield 2001; Laruelle 2009). Aleksandr Barkashov, the leader of the latter organization, maintained that nationalism is love of one's ethnic nation, recognizing it as the highest value. Everything else, including the state and its political and economic system, "must be subordinated to the goal of achieving the highest possible creative manifestations of the Nation" (Barkashov 1993).

The National Salvation Front (NSF), also very influential in the early 1990s, took the opposite view: the Soviet state had been a blessing for all its citizens, and its dismemberment was an unmitigated disaster. In highly emotive language, NSF issued an appeal to restore the lost state:

Dear *rossiiane!* Citizens of the USSR! Fellow citizens! An enormous, unprecedented misfortune has befallen us: the motherland, our country, a great state, which has been bestowed upon us by history, by nature, and by our glorious forefathers, is perishing, is being broken apart, is being buried in darkness and non-existence. (*Den'* 1992)

The individuals behind the NSF had been active in the anti-Yeltsin parliamentary opposition that was shelved into submission in October 1993. After that fateful event, they could no longer influence the nation-building discourse to the same degree, and the initiative passed over to ideologues and intellectuals closer to the Kremlin.

For the Yeltsin team, Soviet nostalgia was not an option. Yeltsin had made his career by championing republic rights for the RSFSR, over and against the authority of the USSR, and had moved into the Kremlin by evicting the last Soviet leader, President Mikhail Gorbachev. Yeltsinites experienced few “phantom limb” pains for the lost empire; for them, the question was what kind of national identity the new, independent Russian state should have: multi-ethnic or civic.

Two of Yeltsin’s most influential advisors on the national question were Ramazan Abdulatipov and Valerii Tishkov, both of whom served brief stints as Minister for Nationality Policy in the 1990s.⁷ Abdulatipov championed a multi-ethnic national identity for the Russian Federation, “a multinational Russia.” An ethnic Avar from Dagestan, Abdulatipov wanted to build on what he saw as the best features of the Soviet model, such as federalism, patriotism, and “the friendship of the peoples” (*druzhba narodov*). Any attempt to undermine ethnic diversity in Russia by means of cultural standardization should be firmly opposed, he argued (Abdulatipov 1993; 1995). In practical policy, Abdulatipov’s approach is reflected in the 1993 Constitution, which opens with the words “We, the multinational people (*mnogonatsional’nyi narod*) of the Russian Federation...,” as well as in the choice of institutional set-up for the new state: in 1992, the Kremlin opted to retain the ethno-federal structure inherited from the RSFSR. The new Russia thus continued to promote the Soviet legacy of institutionalized ethnicity and a “multinational” community (Tolz 1998).

Tishkov, by contrast, almost single-handedly elaborated a program for civic nation-building: a *rossiiskii* nation-state inhabited by *rossiiane*. An enthusiastic supporter of constructivist social theory, Tishkov saw no reason why Russia could not develop into a modern nation-state with the same kind of identity and the same attributes as other European states. The structural as well as the cultural preconditions were in place, he argued: Russia was “more culturally homogeneous than many other large and even small countries considered to be nation-states” (Tishkov 1995, 49). Universal knowledge of the Russian language among the citizens provided the means for pervasive social communication and facilitated the development of a robust supra-ethnic national identity as *rossiiane*, he maintained. Tishkov strongly urged the de-politicization of ethnicity in Russia and was therefore against reinforcing national proprietorship to sub-state entities along ethno-federal lines (Tolz 1998). He had nothing against a “multi-ethnic civic nation,” but adamantly rejected any notion of a “multinational people” along the lines promoted by Abdulatipov (see, for example, Tishkov 2009).⁸

Tishkov could note with satisfaction that some of his ideas found their way into official Russian statements and policies – as when Yeltsin addressed the nation as *rossiiane*, or when, in February 1994 in his first annual address to the Federal Assembly, he defined the nation as “co-citizenship” (*sograzhdanstvo*) (Yeltsin 1994; Tishkov 1995, 48). Another example of such “de-ethnicized nation-building” policy (Breslauer and Dale 1997, 315) was the 1997 decision to drop the hitherto obligatory “nationality entry” in the new internal passports: citizens were no longer to be identified by ethnic affiliation in their official IDs (Akturk 2010).⁹

Hence, during Yeltsin's presidency, nationality policy incorporated elements of both the multi-ethnic and the civic models for nation-building. This was probably not so much a consequence of a carefully calibrated strategy as it was a result of the Kremlin's failure to come up with a clear, unified vision of where to take the nation-building project. A case in point is the abortive attempt to introduce a new national idea. Although it had been written into the new constitution that Russia should have no state ideology, Yeltsin soon realized the need for a unifying idea: "In Russian history of the 20th century, there were various periods: monarchism, totalitarianism, perestroika, and finally a democratic path of development. Each stage had its ideology. We have none" (quoted in Breslauer and Dale 1997, 303). In consequence, Yeltsin established a commission tasked with elaborating a new national idea in 1996. Over the next year, the commission collected an enormous amount of material, but, in the end, the project was quietly shelved, as the experts proved unable to offer a clear-cut, consolidated formula that could satisfactorily represent the whole body of citizens (Kolstø 2004, 327). Also, the 1996 "Concept for the State Nationalities Policy of the Russian Federation" failed to give direction; its authors chose to muddle through by calling for "the development of the national cultures and languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation and the consolidation of the spiritual community of *rossiiane*" – but they also further obscured the civic-ethnic dichotomy by referring to the latter, purportedly civic, community as "ethnic *rossiiane*" (*Kontseptsiia... 1996*).

The tension between the various visions for how to define the new nation is reflected in the failure to agree on new state symbols. When, in 1998, Yeltsin presented draft laws on the design of a new flag, anthem, and coat of arms, these were voted down in the State Duma by a discordant opposition of Communists and nationalists. While the former continued to cling to the red flag and the hammer and sickle, the latter wanted to reintroduce the black, yellow, and white flag of the Romanov dynasty (Kolstø 2000, 245–246). As a result, throughout the Yeltsin period, Russia remained without legally adopted state symbols.

The Kremlin's project was contested, and not only by a motley crew of ethno-nationalists and empire nostalgics of various stripes in Moscow: throughout the 1990s, it continued to be challenged from below, from the political elites of the federal subjects. In August 1990, in a moment of hubris, Yeltsin had encouraged the autonomies: "take as much sovereignty as you can swallow." After 1991, the previously empty shell of Soviet federalism was quickly filled with real political power through a wide-ranging decentralization process (Blakkisrud 2004). In particular, some of the constituent republics, which, according to the Constitution were now defined as "states" (*gosudarstva*), became launching pads for competing, ethnically defined nation-building projects (Gorenburg 2003; Giuliano 2011). The most protracted and systematic resistance came from the leaders of Tatarstan and Chechnya. Both republics refused to sign the 1992 Federation Treaty, seeking instead to realize the aspirations of their titular groups by pursuing independent statehood. Tatarstan returned to the fold after Moscow in 1994 offered a bilateral treaty guaranteeing far-reaching autonomy (which has later been gradually emasculated). In the case of Chechnya, the stand-off culminated in a devastating war (1994–1996) – but also in a gradual reorientation among the separatists, from fighting for national self-determination for the Chechens to a more religion-defined, civilizational conflict, where they sought to mobilize the Muslim population of the entire North Caucasus.

Finally, the Russian nation-building process was further complicated by the question of how Russia should relate to the 25 million ethnic Russians stranded in the other newly independent states, or what Moscow started to refer to as "the Near Abroad." The vacillation between civic and ethnic nation-building strategies left these Russians – as well as the somewhat wider, albeit ill-defined, category of "compatriots" (*sootchestvenniki*) (Shevel 2011, 192–199) – in an ambiguous position, even though the Kremlin's frequently harsh rhetoric – against the Baltic states in particular – was never followed up in real politics (Zevelev 2001).

In sum, the Yeltsin years failed to produce a unifying national idea or a common understanding of who constituted the "in-group" in the new Russian state (Rutland 2010). To the contrary, as the decade drew to a close, the Russian Federation seemed increasingly to be creaking in its joints.

Regional leaders kept challenging the authority of the central government, and, according to Richard Sakwa, Russia was turning into not only a “multinational state” but also a “multi-state state” with “numerous proto-state formations making sovereignty claims vis-à-vis Moscow” (Sakwa 2004, 135–136).

Phase 2: Reviving Patriotism (the 2000s)

When, in 2000, Vladimir Putin took over as president, he inherited a state and a populace that was still struggling to come to terms with the political realities of a truncated state, reduced military capabilities, and the loss of superpower status. On the eve of moving into the Kremlin, Putin presented a program for dealing with the challenges facing Russia. In this “Millennium Manifesto,” he identified three key pillars for a successful Russian resurgence: a strong state, an effective economy, and further consolidation of the national “Russian idea” (*rossiiskaia ideia*) (Putin 1999). In practice, however, the Kremlin seemed to give priority to the two first pillars: the state and the economy. During the period of 2000–2008, the Kremlin carried out a wide-ranging recentralization campaign that affected most sectors of society, turning the presidential administration into the undisputed center of political gravity and state power. In the economic sphere, aided by soaring prices on the international energy market, Russia experienced an unprecedented economic boom, with an average annual GDP growth of more than 7 percent.

As for the third pillar, the national idea, Putin signaled that this would have to evolve gradually, over time: a national idea could not be established by decree but would have to emerge through an organic process in which “universal human values and primordial Russian (*iskonnnye rossiiskie*) values that have withstood the test of time” would slowly merge (Putin 1999). In essence, Putin’s recipe echoed the Soviet approach: a civic nation model, with significant cultural and political rights to ethnic non-Russians, held together by a broad set of common values and traditions (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2004). In a nod to the ethnic diversity of the Russian Federation, the Kremlin continued to define the “Russian people” (*rossiiskii narod*) as a multi-ethnic union of peoples (see, for example, Putin 2007), but in practical policies the emphasis was clearly on advancing state-centered “civic patriotism” (*grazhdanskii patriotizm*). Having learned from the Yeltsin administration’s failed attempt to define the national idea, the Kremlin refrained from trying to pin down exactly what the essence of such patriotism was. This did not, however, prevent it from launching several projects aimed at restoring and bolstering civic pride.

One example of this was the attempt to revive a Soviet-style educational program aimed at instilling patriotism among Russian youth. According to the authorities, the program was intended to counter “unhealthy nationalism” and “disrespectful attitude toward the state and social institutions” through stimulating patriotic consciousness among the rising generation (quoted in Sperling 2010, 230; see also Goode 2018). Another was the rewriting of the past, with the Kremlin, inter alia, sponsoring a new series of history textbooks for use in secondary schools (Levintova and Butterfield 2010). In response to the alleged “negative” history-writing of the 1990s, Putin explained that the new books were meant to “help raise young people in the spirit of pride for their fatherland and its history” (quoted in Sherlock 2007, 172). In short, history was again to play a “constructive,” positive role in the nation-building project (Gjerde 2015).¹⁰

To raise support for Russian statehood in its current configuration, while also reconnecting the present with the past, Putin engaged in symbolic nation-building, propping up the civic *rossiiskii narod* by selectively rehabilitating parts of the Soviet heritage and promoting a medley of pre-revolutionary, Soviet, and Russian symbols. In December 2000, the eclectic selection of the double-headed eagle of the Romanovs as the coat of arms, the standard of the old merchant navy (and the colors associated with the democratic movement of the 1990s) as the state flag, and the old Soviet hymn with updated lyrics as the national anthem became the official state symbols of the Russian Federation (Kolstø 2006, 685–698).

At the level of federal politics, Putin's centralization drive meant that competing political projects – and, implicitly, support for alternative visions of the Russian national idea – were either co-opted, as with the nationalist Rodina (Motherland) party, or pushed to the margins of political life (Laruelle 2010b). Russian ethno-nationalism as well as empire nostalgia survived primarily in fringe groups and (quasi-) academic circles (Umland 2002). Attempts to mobilize the ethnic Russian majority population around the nationalist cause, such as through the annual Russian March (*Russkii marsh*), were met with only limited success (Verkhovsky 2010). In part, this was due to another aspect of the push for centralized control: the Kremlin was tightening its grip on the national media. From the onset of Putin's presidency, the major media channels were either renationalized or taken over by Kremlin-friendly actors such as Gazprom-Media. With restricted access to national TV companies, the “non-systemic” opposition (that is, the political parties that did not get a stamp of approval from the Kremlin), including ethno-nationalists and imperialists of various stripes, lost their most important channel for reaching potential supporters.

Similarly, for the regional level, the flipside of centralization and strengthening of state capacity was a reduction of regional autonomy, thereby undercutting the rivalling nation-building projects launched from below during the previous decade. During Putin's two first terms in office, these projects were reined in and partly rolled back. The new war in Chechnya (1999–2002)¹¹ returned that republic to Moscow's control and served to demonstrate the Kremlin's new resolve. Soon, the regional leaders, who only a few years earlier had been likened to “the boyars of old,” ruling their regions as their “separate fiefdoms” (Sakwa 2002, 248), caved in. In 2004, the Kremlin deprived the regional leaders of their popular mandate, introducing centrally appointed governors and republic presidents (Blakkisrud 2015).¹² In some cases, it even instigated the dissolution of the federal subjects themselves: between 2005 and 2008, six ethnically defined autonomous okrugs were merged with their Russian-populated neighbors. The first decade of the 2000s thus saw a systematic dismantling of the ethno-federalization that had taken place during Yeltsin's watch. By the end of the decade, not much was left of the ethnic autonomy of the 1990s, leading some observers to conclude that Russia had become a “federation without federalism” (Petrov 2009).

During the course of Putin's two first presidential terms, civic patriotism thus definitely took centerstage, pushing the Russian ethno-nationalists and imperialists (as well as the national entrepreneurs among various ethnic minority groups) to the margins. Dmitrii Medvedev's caretaker presidency (2008–2012) did not really change the tenor of the official Russian nation-building project. However, in December 2010, when riots broke out in Manezhnaia Square in downtown Moscow – with an angry mob of radical nationalists and football hooligans uniting behind nationalist and anti-Caucasian slogans – this served as a wakeup call: despite their marginalization on the public political scene, Russian ethno-nationalism was still a force to be reckoned with. The authorities' immediate response was to crack down on non-conformist nationalist and xenophobic groups, such as the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (Verkhovsky 2016). A more comprehensive reconceptualization of the national idea and the nation-building project would nevertheless have to wait until Putin returned to the Kremlin.

Phase 3: The Return of the Russians (the 2010s)

The September 2011 announcement by Putin and Medvedev that they would swap positions after the next presidential elections, with Putin returning to the presidency, can be seen as heralding a new phase in Russian nation-building. At the time, there had been few signs that the Kremlin planned to undertake any substantial revision of its approach to the “national question.” But the powers-that-be had miscalculated the public reception of this “castling” move. In the aftermath of the flawed December 2011 State Duma elections, large-scale demonstrations erupted in Moscow and other major cities: and, for the first time, liberals and leftists joined ranks with Russian nationalists in unified opposition to the regime (Kolstø 2016b). With less than three months left before the presidential elections, this set off the warning bells in the Kremlin.

Until then, the Kremlin had always kept Russian ethno-nationalism at arm's length. However, within the ruling elite there was a widespread belief that, despite the ethno-nationalists' failure to win political positions and power, there existed an untapped potential for nationalist mobilization among the ethnic Russian population (Laruelle 2010b; Blakkisrud 2016).¹³ Moreover, the influx of labor migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus – Russia had by then become second only to the USA in the number of resident immigrants – and recurrent terrorist attacks related to the smoldering insurgency in Russia's own North Caucasian republics seemed to provide fertile ground for further recruitment. With xenophobia on the rise (Laruelle 2009; Schenk 2010), the Kremlin revised its strategy and opted to outmaneuver the nationalists by appropriating elements of their rhetoric.

In January 2012, Putin, as part of his re-election bid, published an article in *Nezavisimaia gazeta* on the “national question.” Here, he lashed out against European-style multiculturalism as well as Russian ethno-nationalism. The latter he described as “a bacillus” that, if left unchecked, might infect and shatter the Russian state. Over the centuries, Russia had undergone a unique process that had led to the formation of “a multi-ethnic society, but a united people,” he claimed (Putin 2012). Although Putin thus continued to argue the case for civic patriotism,¹⁴ the op-ed nevertheless indicated an important rhetorical shift: holding up the ethnic Russians (*russkie*) as “the state-forming nation” (*gosudarstvoobrazuiushchii narod*) – with the *russkii* people and the *russkaia* culture as “the core and the binding fabric of this unique civilization” – meant that ethnic Russians were now accorded a far more prominent role in the Kremlin's nation-building project than ever before.

Some observers have seen this article as signaling an “ethnic turn” in Russian identity discourse (Kolstø 2016a; Teper 2016). While emphatically dismissing all talk about “building a Russian ‘national,’ mono-ethnic state” as contradictory to the very essence of Russian statehood, Putin advanced “Russianness” (*russkost'*) as at the heart of the state-centered identity:

Self-determination for Russians (*russkie*) – that is a poly-ethnic civilization held together by a Russian cultural core (*russkoe kul'turnoe iadro*) [...]. The great mission of the Russians (*russkie*) is to unite and cement this civilization. (Putin 2012)

This discursive trend towards the Russification of national identity culminated with the rhetoric around Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. In a highly emotive speech on the occasion of the official accession of Crimea and Sevastopol as subjects of the Russian Federation, Putin “all but explicitly declar[ed] Russia as a nation-state of *russkie*” (Teper 2016, 378). He lamented the fate of the ethnic Russians as “one of the biggest, if not the biggest people in the world to be divided by borders” (Putin 2014). More importantly, from a nation-building perspective, in referring to things “Russian,” Putin now repeatedly replaced the civic, state-centered *rossiiskii* with the ethno-cultural *russkii*. Not only did he present the city of Sevastopol as a “*russkii* city” (possibly justifiable in ethnic terms, as more than 70 percent of its population self-identified as ethnic Russians), he also spoke of the *russkii* Black Sea Fleet, and of Crimea as being native *russkaia* land (*iskonno russkaia zemlia*) (Putin 2014).

Putin's Crimea speech must be understood in the context of the patriotic fervor that swept Russia in the aftermath of the annexation of the peninsula, with politicians and the population at large rallying behind the slogan “Crimea is ours.” However, the Kremlin was at the same time acutely aware that there are limits to how far Russian authorities can go in giving priority to the ethnic Russian population without provoking a backlash in the form of counter-mobilization among the titulars in the Federation's ethnic republics. Hence, the explicit emphasis on Russianness was complemented with rhetoric that appealed to people far beyond the ethnic Russian/Russianized core.

In a keynote speech on national identity and values to international Russia-watchers in Valdai in 2013, Putin, after having restated the importance of the triad of ethnic Russians, Russian language,

and Russian culture as the focal point for national cohesion and identity, also added the Russian Orthodox Church (Putin 2013). The reference to the Church points to the conservative outlook that has permeated Moscow's worldview after 2012 with the Kremlin recasting itself as the defender of "traditional values" and with Russia as a beacon of traditional virtues and family values, representing "true Europe" – in contrast to a "*Geiropa*" ("Gay Europe") in the grip of moral decay (Riabov and Riabova 2014; Sharafutdinova 2014; Laruelle 2016a). This broader, values-focused reorientation fits well with the traditionalist agenda of the Russian Orthodox Church – and the Church has indeed become an important partner in the realization of Putin's political project – but is directed at a much wider audience than the churchgoing faithful: the values-based rhetoric is intended to assist the regime in enlisting the support of the "silent majority" at home (Laruelle 2013; Suslov and Uzlaner 2020), as well as national-conservative constituencies beyond Russia's borders.

Phase 4: Enter Civilization? (the 2020s)

As the decade was drawing to a close, the values-based identity project was increasingly anchored in a supranational, civilizational rhetoric (Kazharski 2019), presenting Russia as a "distinct civilization" (Hale and Laruelle 2021). An identity discourse cast in civilizational terms has deep roots in a Russian context, dating back to the 19th century but surviving only as a marginalized school of thought throughout the 1990s and up until the onset of Putin's third term (Zevelev 2009; Tsygankov 2016; Mjør and Turoma 2020). According to this discourse, Russia is being identified as a separate "state-civilization" (*gosudarstvo-tsvilizatsiia*) based on a set of culturally distinct values (*samobytnost'*) (Tsygankov 2016, 149). At the 2019 Valdai conference, Putin declared:

From the very beginning, Russia [...] was a multinational, multiconfessional state. In a sense, [Russia] is a *state-civilization* that organically absorbed many traditions and cultures, preserved their originality, uniqueness and, at the same time, [...] the unity of the peoples living in it. (Putin 2019, italics added)

This "state-civilization" is usually presented in civic terms, as a state-centered *rossiiskaia tsvilizatsiia* (Hale and Laruelle 2020), but the content is clearly ethno-culturally *ruskii*. Moreover, this "Russian civilization" often appears without the modifying "state-". It thus leaves the exact delimitation of this civilizational construct open: Does it transcend the current state borders? And if yes, to what extent does it overlap with another similarly vaguely identified concept associated with Putin's current terms as president, the "Russian World" (*Ruskii mir*) (Laruelle 2015; Kazharski 2019)? The latter emphasizes the cultural and political unity of all Russians – within Russia as well as beyond its borders (Shcherbak and Sych 2017, 323).

According to Olga Malinova (2020), the current "civilizational talk" reflects Russia's imperial legacy as a multi-ethnic nation, while at the same time addressing the strained relations with the West (see also Hale and Laruelle 2021, 604). Increasingly, the Kremlin's emerging identity discourse has been colored not only by "Russianness" (*ruskost'*) but also by a language inspired by supranational, civilizational thinking.

The Way Ahead: Squaring Civic with Ethnic in a Russian Civilization?

One way to interpret the upsurge of *ruskii*-centered rhetoric since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 is that this was a delayed reaction to the breakup of the Soviet Union. When the USSR disintegrated, the leaders of the titular nations of the other Union republics could mobilize their populations against the old "imperial" center, reinforcing the imagined community under the banner of a new, nationalizing leadership. In the Russian Federation, however, both nation-builders and the population in general seemed at a loss as to where exactly to draw the line between the new collective "us" and the "others" (Tolz 1998; Tolz 2001; Shevel 2011). Almost one fifth of all ethnic

Russians after 1991 suddenly found themselves living *outside* Russia's state borders, cut off from their ethnic kin. At the same time, ethnic minority groups *within* the new state, inspired by the "Parade of Sovereignties" and Yeltsin's promises about federalization, were becoming increasingly vociferous. And with the Russian Federation internationally recognized as the legal successor to the Soviet Union, there was no readily identifiable "other" against which to mobilize in the name of national unity.

Some three decades later, we may conclude that Yeltsin's civic *rossiiane* identity, launched as the Kremlin's initial preferred response to this challenge, flopped. Despite Tishkov's passionate arguments about the Russian state having always been a nation state – whether in its Tsarist, Soviet, or current Russian Federation version (Tishkov 2010) – the term *rossiiane* has been disappearing from the official nation-building narrative. To give one example: since 2012, Putin in his annual addresses to the Federal Assembly has not referred to the population as *rossiiane* even once. Instead, he has typically employed the more neutral *grazhdane Rossii* ("citizens of Russia"). The *rossiiane* identity might be seen as a stopgap measure: a slightly updated version of the old Soviet civic identity, spanning different ethnic identities, but readjusted to a greatly reduced space and a halved population. In the longer run, however, this term proved to have little emotional resonance (Rutland 2010).

Today, the nation model has become unmistakably more *ruskii*-oriented – but centered on language, culture, and, possibly, religion, not on descent. It is incorrect to interpret the *ruskii* stance as an expression of Russian ethno-nationalism (Laruelle 2016b). Quite the contrary: it could be argued that this shift is more about recognizing the *ruskii* core that has always been at the heart of the allegedly civic Soviet and *rossiiane* identities: Russian language, Russian history, Russian culture.

Instead of postulating a civic community based on state borders and citizenship, the Kremlin has now narrowed down the national identity to something immediately more recognizable and meaningful for the majority population – while at the same time allowing the borders of the in-group to be defined vaguely enough to make it possible to welcome members of other ethnic groups into an expanded "self." The Russian core is surrounded by layers of more or less culturally assimilated minorities and various hyphenated hybrid identities; there is an ethno-cultural *ruskii* center of gravity in a multi-speed identity integration project. In that perspective, Putin's use of terms like *ruskie armiane* ("Russian Armenians") or *ruskie tatory* ("Russian Tatars") (Putin 2012) is not so much a misnomer as an expression of a new take on the national identity and the nation-building project.

In the wake of Crimea, the Kremlin has been accused of pursuing a "predominantly utilitarian approach toward Russian ethno-nationalism" (Teper 2016, 380). What is certain is that while Putin has referred to himself as Russia's "most genuine and most effective nationalist" (Putin 2018), the Kremlin has been using nationalism instrumentally. By co-opting some of the rhetoric of other national identity entrepreneurs of different strains, it has largely succeeded in marginalizing other competing identity projects. First, the new emphasis on the nation's "Russianness" leaves scant room for traditional Russian ethno-nationalists to mobilize (Kolstø 2016a). Second, the emphasis on "civilization" enables the Kremlin to rhetorically extend the in-group beyond the current state borders, letting the Kremlin steal some of the imperialists' thunder. Finally, while Putin continues to pay tribute to the multi-ethnic nation, the Kremlin underlines that "the binding fabric of this unique civilization" is its ethno-cultural *ruskii* core (Putin 2012). Hence, many of the parallel sub-state ethnic nation-building projects within the Federation are now fighting an uphill battle against cultural assimilation (see, for example, Alexseev 2016; Yusupova 2018; Yusupova 2021).¹⁵

The current "civilizational talk" (Malinova 2020) breaks with – or rather, transcends – the civic-ethnic dichotomy-based models introduced above. Both the emphasis on the civilizational aspects and the positioning of the ethno-culturally Russian at the core of the identity project reflect a strong and persistent imperial strand in the discourse.

By being “purposefully ambiguous” about the boundaries of the national identity (Shevel 2011), the Kremlin has provided itself with room to adopt flexible responses in line with its broader policy interests both domestically and internationally. It is usually deemed advantageous for nation-building processes to establish a clear line between “us” and “them.” However, by squaring the civic with the ethnic, and refocusing from *rossiiskii* and *rossiiane* to *russkii* and *russkie* at the core, the Kremlin may in fact have devised a more viable base for its further nation-building project: Over time, the great majority of the populace might eventually be subsumed under this extended *ruskii* identity.

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank my good colleague Professor Pål Kolstø at the University of Oslo for invaluable inputs to this article, in particular as regards the part covering the 1990s.

Disclosures. None.

Notes

- 1 Given the top-down focus, this article relies primarily on a reading of official statements and policy documents – most importantly, the President’s annual addresses to Federal Assembly (a tradition instituted by Boris Yeltsin in 1994) and various landmark speeches on identity issues (such as Vladimir Putin’s 1999 “Millennium Manifesto” and 2013 “Valdai Speech”), as well as Yeltsin’s 1996 Concept for the State Nationalities Policy of the Russian Federation and Putin’s 2012 State Strategy on Nationalities Policy for the Period through 2025 (revised in 2018).
- 2 For a discussion of everyday nationalism and bottom-up perspectives on national identity in contemporary Russia, see, for example, Le Huérou 2015; Goode 2018; Blackburn 2020; and Goode, Stroup, and Gaufman 2022.
- 3 For other attempts at developing a typology of rivalling post-Soviet Russian nation-building projects, see, for example, Tolz 1998; Laruelle 2010; and Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2018b.
- 4 Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea added a further 27,000 km² to its territory, but the international community has not recognized this unilateral change of borders.
- 5 In some cases, one “homeland” consisted of two titular groups. The sole exception was Dagestan, which is home to more than a dozen ethnic groups.
- 6 For an insightful discussion of the relationship between empire and nation in Imperial Russia, see Miller 2015.
- 7 Tishkov served as minister from February to October 1992, Abdulatipov from September 1998 to May 1999.
- 8 Even so, as Oxana Shevel (2011, 183–184) has remarked, it is not easy to see exactly how Tishkov’s *rossiiskii* nation concept differs from the official “multinational people” other than in terminology.
- 9 In many republics, however, this was denounced as a blatant provocation, seen as the first step in introducing a unitary state. A compromise was finally found when the republics were allowed to insert an extra page in the passports with an optional entry for ethnicity for those who wanted it (Simonsen 2005).
- 10 The Kremlin’s use of memory politics became even more pronounced in what is here referred to as the third and fourth phases of Russia’s post-Soviet nation-building process, with the Kremlin increasingly engaging in “memory wars” with some of its neighbors and former allies (Miller 2020; see also Malinova 2021).
- 11 While the hostilities continued beyond 2002, in that year responsibility for the counter-insurgency operation was transferred from the armed forces to the FSB (and from 2003, to the Ministry of Internal Affairs).
- 12 In 2012, direct elections were formally reinstated; in practice, however, the Kremlin has continued to control the outcome of the gubernatorial electoral contests (Blakkisrud 2015).

- 13 These fears seemed partially confirmed by the outcome of the 2013 Moscow mayoral elections, in which the moderate nationalist Aleksei Navalny won 27 percent of the vote (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2018).
- 14 Patriotism remains a key pillar in Putin's nation-building project. In a much-publicized speech to a group of leading Russian entrepreneurs in 2016, he went as far as to declare: "We do not and cannot have any other unifying idea but patriotism" (Putin 2016).
- 15 A notable exception here is Chechnya, where the current leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, has been given a free hand in return for crushing the North Caucasian Islamists (Souleimanov and Jasutis 2016; Wilhelmssen 2018).

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