



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Communist and Post-Communist Studies

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud)

## Russian national identity and the Ukrainian crisis

Paul Goble<sup>1</sup>

## ARTICLE INFO

Article history:  
Available online xxx

Keywords:  
Nationalism  
Russian nationalism  
Ukrainian nationalism  
Ethnicity  
Vladimir Putin  
Russian–Ukrainian war  
Identity  
Competitive nationalisms

## ABSTRACT

No aspect of the Russian–Ukrainian war has proved more unexpected than the revelation that Ukrainian national identity both ethnic and civil is far stronger than almost anyone thought, while Russian national identity is far more fragmented and weak than most expected. That was especially surprising to many because Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine on the assumption that Ukrainians are not a “real” nation unlike Russians and that his actions were advancing the interest of what the Kremlin leader chooses to call “the Russian world”. One result of this discovery has been that the Kremlin has had to take Ukrainian identity more seriously. Another has been that it has gone to great lengths to promote Russian national identity via state-controlled media, but the latter effort has come up short because Moscow’s ability to promote Russian identity is limited by the same three factors that have restricted previous Russian rulers: the fundamental weakness of Russian identity, the tensions inherent between identities the state supports and those it fears, and the reactions of the increasingly numerous non-Russian nationalities to any ethnic Russian identifications.

© 2015 Published by Elsevier Ltd on behalf of The Regents of the University of California.

Vladimir Putin like many Russians operates on the basis of the largely unexamined assumption that Russian identity is both ancient and strong. His propaganda simply asserts this without much regard to the facts. He makes language, religion and history central to the understanding he projects, but all of those characteristics, while not unimportant, are perhaps necessary but not sufficient conditions for the existence of Russian national identity. That has become obvious not only to many Russians but to others as Putin has engaged in a war against Ukraine, a people he says that is not a separate nation but rather a part of the Russian one. As a result, the Ukrainian war has highlighted the fragility of Russian national identity and the incomplete nature of Putin’s offering.

No aspect of the Russian–Ukrainian war has proved more unexpected than the revelation that Ukrainian national identity both ethnic and civil is far stronger than almost anyone thought, while Russian national identity is far more fragmented and weak than most expected. That was especially surprising to many because Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine on the assumption that Ukrainians are not a “real” nation unlike Russians and that his actions were advancing the interest of what the Kremlin leader chooses to call “the Russian world.”

One result of this discovery has been that the Kremlin and the West have had to take Ukrainian identity far more seriously than they expected and another has been that it has gone to great lengths to promote Russian national identity via state-controlled media, but the latter effort has come up short because Moscow’s ability to promote Russian identity is limited by the same three factors that have restricted previous Russian rulers: the fundamental weakness of Russian identity, the tensions inherent between identities the state supports and those it fears, and the reactions of the increasingly numerous non-Russian nationalities to any ethnic Russian identifications (Goble in Kappeler, 1990).

<sup>1</sup> Paul A. Goble, a former longtime US government specialist on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space, is now retired and blogs at Window on Eurasia. He is the editor of seven volumes on religion and ethnicity and the author of numerous articles on these issues.

Indeed, at least one of the reasons that Putin went to war in Ukraine was to solidify his version of Russian national identity so that it could provide him with the kind of popular support he craves without constituting the threat that a genuine Russian nationalist movement independent of the state would represent. After the protests of 2011–2012, the Kremlin leader looked out at a Russian nation whose members defined themselves not by what they are and who they want to be but by what they fear and view as alien, a nation in short that was clearly fraying at the edges with some, like the Siberians, identifying first and foremost with a region, others like the Cossacks in terms of a specific historical community, and still a third with the state more than with the people.<sup>2</sup>

One prominent Russian nationalist, Pavel Svyatenkov (2014) acknowledged the weakness of Russian identity and the strength of Ukrainian identity shortly after the start of the war. He argued that Russians have neither a supra-national non-ethnic identity of the kind the state has wanted or an ethnic one that nationalists would like to see while Ukrainians have both, something Russians should not only acknowledge but copy. Most people think that the Russian national movement is about defending “the Russian people and a single Russian identity,” Svyatenkov said at that time, but if one considers the question more closely, it turns out that what is called “the Russian national movement” consists of “a great multitude of mini-identities,” Cossack, regional, fan clubs and the like (Svyatenkov, 2014).

Thus, instead of being a movement itself, the Russian national movement “is in essence a union of subcultures,” something that wouldn’t be a bad thing “if the subcultures existed on the basis of a single Russian identity”. But that is not the case. Instead, each represents its own “small ‘nation,’ and there is no larger one.” In other words,” Svyatenkov wrote, “people call themselves Russian nationalists but do this on the basis of a subculture, on that of their own mini-identity. And if Russians as a whole are a people but not a nation, the subculture [of each] begins to replace the nation” as a whole and undermines the possibility of its formation. (Svyatenkov, 2014; Goble, 2013).

Ethnic Russian identity is not formulated clearly, something which becomes obvious if one compares it to Ukrainian identity, which is based on “consciousness” and “the acceptance of Ukrainism as an ideological anti-Russian doctrine,” which often takes the form of the conviction that “Ukraine is not Russia,” as former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma (2003) titled his book. A very important quality of this Ukrainian identity is its “ability to integrate outsiders: study Ukrainian and say that you are a Ukrainian and ‘welcome to the club.’” But that is not how Russians who call themselves Russian nationalists act. Instead, many of them are in the business of excluding people on the basis of inheritance or something else (Nicholson, 2003).

At present, Svyatenkov (2014) said: “the concept of ‘a drop of non-Russian blood’ dominates,” which means that someone who has any non-Russian ancestors won’t be accepted as a Russian even if he wants to be and which has the effect of excluding from the Russian nation even its national heroes like Pushkin and ultimately all Russians as well. While it “deprives Russians of Russian identity, this concept does not lead to the appearance of any new self-identification.” Instead, it reduces Russians to the status of “a nameless biomass which does not even have a self-designator” or its own state and which is easily infected by “the virus of Soviet [-style] racism”.

The success of Ukrainianism as an inclusive national project, Svyatenkov suggested, is having a demonstration effect on many of the Russian mini-cultures such as the Pomors or Sibiryaks who are beginning to think about advancing their own agendas by being welcoming to others but not about forming a single Russian nation. These groups have not been successful so far because “Russians are still a sufficiently homogeneous people” even if they are not a nation. “But gradually the split will grow” given that the regime views the Russian as “a Eurasian slave who does not have a Motherland” and “sooner or later” there will be “an explosion of separatism and the formation on the basis of the Russian people of several, already not Russian but possibly anti-Russian nations.”

The logic of such groups who are “‘running toward Ukrainianism’” is clear, Svyatenkov argued, and it can only be opposed by an analogous effort to promote an inclusive vision of a Russian nation, one that accepts people on the basis either of their origin or their desire to be a part of it and strives to form a single nation with its own state. “If Russian identity is not made ‘inclusive,’” Svyatenkov warned in conclusion, “the split of Russian identity will only deepen and not only on the Ukrainian issue. It threatens to pass into the entire people. Preventing that from happening,” he said, “is our task.” But it is quite clear from his words that this will not be an easy one.

Svyatenkov is far from the only one wrestling with this problem. In a survey of discussions by scholars and politicians about it today, Anna Bryzgalova (2014) cited the opinions of three others who are seeking to identify what a Russian nation is or might be in the future. And Raisa Barash, a researcher at the Moscow Institute of Sociology, has argued that the problem of the Russian nation today is a reflection of the fact that “Russians were deprived of the chance to realize their right to their own ethno-subjectiveness,” that is, of their right to form their own state.

<sup>2</sup> The rapid spread and intensification of Siberian identity is a far greater threat to the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation east of the Urals than is the Peoples Republic of China is, according to both Russian census officials and residents of that enormous and potentially wealthy region now controlled and ruled from Moscow. Census officials in Siberia acknowledge that an impressive number of residents of Tyumen, Omsk, Novosibirsk, Kemerovo, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, Barnaul and Yakutsk identified themselves as Siberians by nationality in the 2010 census (“*Russkiy reportyor*,” 2011) Three things are striking about that. First, the officials say, “the majority of these people considered themselves [ethnic] Russians” only eight years earlier. Second, there really are a lot of them and not just a few marginal as the media have suggested. And third, there would be even more “if the census had worked as it was supposed to.” The 2010 census didn’t, however, as the officials concede. Many census workers didn’t bother to visit people, they say, but simply “filled up the forms” with information from residency records, and wrote down “Russian” when anyone declared that he or she was a Siberian by nationality.

Because of that, she said, “Russian” became a synonym of “Soviet” in Soviet times and at present of “non-ethnic Russian” in post-Soviet times. Events in Ukraine this year have sparked an interest among many Russians to change that situation, but so far, the Russian state has not been willing to allow such a development. In Barash's view, “Russianness is not so much an ethnic as a socio-cultural reality. However, today it bears to a significant degree a declarative character” only because of the failure of many to be able to articulate with clarity what Russian “identity” means or should mean other than in terms of the state (Bryzgalova, 2014).

Mikhail Starshinov, the first deputy chairman of the Duma committee on nationalities, added that the only way for this to change is for “the task of the ethno-cultural development of the Russian people” to become the focus of “a separate federal program” so that the state can structure this national identity. But Dmitry Demushkin, one of the organizers of the Russian Marches, is doubtful that will work. The state focuses on Russians from time to time but never for very long. As a result, no real changes have come from above. Instead, he implies, they must come from within the Russian people themselves if they are to become a real nation.

Polling data supports the conclusions of those who suggest that Russian identity is far weaker than many thought and Ukrainian identity far stronger. Only 45 percent of the citizens of the Russian Federation currently view themselves as members of a civic Russian nation, a poll finding that has forced Moscow to reduce its hopes that it will be able to convince 86 percent of the country's residents to identify in that way by 2018. Now, officials say, they hope to raise the number to 64 percent. And the Russian Public Opinion Research Center found that “44 percent of Russians said that while a Ukrainian could be called an ethnic Russian if he or she had lived in Russia for many years, only 7 percent thought the same could be said of a Chechen or Dagestani from Russia's North Caucasus.” According to Valery Fedorov (2013), the head of the Center, “this split reflects the existence of two different linguistic concepts for understanding Russian identity: while the Russian word ‘*russky*’ implies an ethnic Russian identity, the word ‘*rossiysky*’ denotes Russian citizenship and an allegiance to the Russian state.”

Most commentators who have focused on the ethnic divisions within the Russian Federation view them as a threat to the unity of the Russian nation and hence of that country, but the poll suggested that Russians are deeply divided by other issues that make the formation of any common national identity on a positive basis extremely difficult. But perhaps the most interesting finding in this poll is the difference between the identities that Russians give when they are asked to select from a list provided by the surveyors and the identities they give to an open-ended query where no such list is provided.

In the first case, 57 percent of the sample identified themselves as Russian citizens, 35 percent as residents of a particular place, and 16 percent as members of an ethnic group. Sixty-three percent said they were “proud to be Russian citizens” and 83 percent could correctly identify the colors on the Russian flag. But in the latter case, 32 percent said they were their “own person and didn't identify with any group”. The next largest number – 11 percent – identified as middle class, six percent said they were pensioners “and just four percent as ethnic Russians.”

Confronted with this situation, the Kremlin ordered the preparation of a special report entitled “National Identity and the Future of Russia” which argued that Russian language and culture but not Russian history must be “the main unifying factor[s] for citizens of the Russian Federation, an implicit recognition that Moscow's post-Soviet effort to promote a civic identity has failed and that sub-ethnic identifications based on different histories and different understandings of history remain critically important (Fedorov, 2013).

One of the most intriguing conclusions of the report was that “the potential of a factor like the tradition of defending the country from external or internal enemies is also exhausted” because “people are tired of conflicts”. Another is the impact of the enormous size of the country. That could become “a colossal resource for strengthening national identity,” the report said, but today it is “not viewed by the majority of Russians as a source of identity,” even though Russia's size and wealth “exert an enormous influence on national character”.

One commentator in discussing the report observed that “it is incorrect to define this cult of force as a manifestation of aggressiveness or a desire to beat the weak ... Today the psychology of living in a besieged fortress inherited from Soviet times is [still] strong ... [but Russia] has overcome” the sense of weakness of the 1990s. And another suggested that the current understanding of patriotism is “closely connected with geopolitical thinking: our country is large and we will be happy if it will be still larger”. Olga Vandyshcheva (2014) does not accept this line of thought because expansionism is being used to distract attention from problems at home.

Non-Russians within the Russian Federation have also called attention to the ways in which the collision of civic and ethnic identities limit the ability of Russians as well as non-Russians to solidify their identities, perhaps more for the former than the latter. Rashit Akhmetov, editor of Kazan's “*Zvezda Povolzhya*,” for example, has argued that Putin's promotion of the idea of a “Russian world” represents the death knell for a civic Russian identity and that this, combined with his authoritarian and great power chauvinist approach, is exacerbating ethnic identities of Russians and non-Russians alike (Akhmetov, 2014).

The Tatarstan editor says that efforts to promote such a non-ethnic civic identity for residents of Russia over the past two decades have never been very successful because they are roughly equivalent to the promotion of Esperanto as a universal language and the Soviet people as an identity (Akhmetov, 2014). Just as an Institute of Literature cannot create a Pushkin at will, he said, identities have to be born and grow on their own. Efforts to promote them typically fail. Esperanto was never widely accepted despite early Soviet interest in it, and few identified as part of the Soviet people. Had it been otherwise, the USSR would not have disintegrated so quickly.

Many assume that Valery Tishkov, the former Russian nationalities minister and current director of the Moscow Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, came up with the idea for a civic Russian identity on the basis of the Soviet people, but in fact, as Akhmetov pointed out, the academician did so by drawing on the American experience. But in doing so, Tishkov and his

government backers failed to take into account the enormous difference between the United States and the Russian Federation. The US is a young immigrant-based society consisting of people who have already by coming from somewhere else signaled their willingness to adapt and change.

The peoples within the Russian Federation, in contrast, are nations with long histories of their own who were conquered or otherwise absorbed. And that second aspect is equally important in explaining why a “melting pot” model simply won't work in the Russian case: Unlike the US which has won over people to a common identity by a remarkable level of tolerance of diversity, the Russian state has sought to impose one and thus kept people apart. Neither the Russian Empire nor the Soviet Union was capable of becoming a melting pot society. Instead, their populations remained ethnically defined, and the more pressure the regime has imposed on people, the greater the likelihood that they will value their own distinctive identities and go their own way.

Indeed, Akhmetov wrote, the Russian-Ukrainian war itself says a lot about the different ethno-national futures of Russia and other countries. Ukraine is not trying to create a non-ethnic “Ukrainian” identity like the one Tishkov and others have promoted for Russia. Instead, Ukraine accepts the existence of a variety of ethnic groups within its population and wins support from them because it does. Moscow in contrast by continuing to press for a single “supra-national” identity clearly does not accept their distinctiveness, and thus from the point of view of non-Russians represents a threat to their existence. As a result, Akhmetov concludes, Tishkov's idea of “Rossiyane” has finally collapsed with Putin's “Russian world” and his “Novorossiia” project.

One of the reasons Putin and the Russian media cannot succeed in promoting a supra-national identity or entirely control the emergence of some kind of ethnic one among Russians is that among the Kremlin's key allies are those, like the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, who oppose any diminution of the ethnic component because they see it as an attack on themselves and their prerogatives. Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, who often speaks for Patriarch Kirill himself, has said that no one should be afraid of talking about the national self-consciousness of the ethnic Russian people or try to “dissolve” it within some “new and artificial identities” at home or abroad. And he has insisted that “today it is very important to say how Russians are distinguished from non-Russians” and to reject any attempt to ignore or level the differences between them (Cherepov, 2015).

Russians should not be afraid of being quite specific about who they are and about questions concerning their “national self-consciousness,” Chaplin said. And they should view as “absolutely incorrect” any efforts to subsume them into larger groups or give them any “new artificial identities”. To be sure, the churchman continued, Russia is “a multi-national country and there are various identities in it, but just as no one must block the self-definition of people whose identity is distinctive from Russian in one or another degree, so too no one should interfere with Russian people who are engaged” in defining their national identity.

Many commentators and politicians give lip service to this idea, but their statements have not yet led to actions. “Among the basic state documents and legal acts, the situation continues by inertia to be what it was in the 1990s when the authorities were too attracted by an attempt to drown ethnic identities into something new and constructed ... I hope,” Chaplin said, “that we will soon be able to overcome this sad inheritance” from that decade (Cherepov, 2015).

The attempt to create a non-ethnic “Russian identity” was in many ways a recapitulation of what the Soviets tried and failed to do with their “Soviet people”. “Such a community never existed,” Chaplin argued, and despite enormous efforts, the peoples of Russia did not lose their ethnic identities and have sought to build on them since 1991. Equally mistaken, the churchman says, are those who act as if national and religious identities were created by the Soviets. “Such people do not notice” that it is not these identities which were created but rather that the Soviets tried to destroy them, including the distinctive Russian national identity (Cherepov, 2015).

There is another threat to Russian identity, Chaplin said, one that arises from the attempts to subsume Russia into a European or any other identity including that of Islam. “Many people are thinking about how to avoid one or the other,” and that is appropriate because Russian identity must remain unique.

The Kremlin also faces opposition from its media campaign in support of Russian national identity from those who may take his apparent support of their ideas as *carte blanche* for the kind of movement that neither Putin nor any other Russian ruler would be able to control. Indeed, Aleksey Kupras (2015), a Ukrainian analyst argued in Kyiv's “Delovaya stolitsa” that Vladimir Putin may have caused to regret his promotion of right radical Russian nationalists because some of them reject one or another of his policies such as his attack on Ukraine while many believe he is “too soft” in pursuit of his objectives, including that one, and thus both represent a potential threat to his position.

It is no secret to anyone that over the last seven years, the Ukrainian commentator pointed out, that “great power ideology has been actively supported by the authorities in Russia,” and that the regime has financed some “mega-radical groups”. That seemed to the Kremlin a strategy with no downside because those it supported appeared to have nowhere else to go. Between 2008 and 2014, Kurpas says, the numbers of nationalist and radical movements in Russia increased by a factor of three. And as they grew in number, these divided between the pro-Kremlin ones and the “anti-authority” ones, with the second sparking concern among the leadership because they are “well-organized, instructed, and profess an even harsher state nationalist policy than Putin and his entourage do” (Kupras, 2015).

In support of his contention, highlighted in the headline of his article that Putin may soon face a “Right Sector threat” like the one Kyiv does, the Kyiv commentator pointed to four developments that must be disturbing to the Kremlin. First, in 2014, in central Russia alone, there were more than 500 official camps established to provide basic and advanced military training for the radical nationalists. “More than half” of these were pro-Kremlin, but many of the others were anti-authority and thus a

potential threat. “As a rule,” he said, “people from the organs control the radicals,” and some of them like those they instruct may feel that Putin’s approach is too soft. That incubation is happening even as support for public actions by nationalist groups has fallen by two-thirds, and these groups may in fact be displacing the more high-profile but more loyal Russian nationalists as a force to be reckoned with.

Second, Kurpas argued, “all the official training camps officially work as recruitment points for the war in Ukraine.” But in recent months, “only a tenth” of those who pass through these camps are being sent there. The rest are being trained for street battles and fights in major cities. If they turn against the Kremlin, they have the skills to be a threat. And third, he said, the Russian authorities have “changed their tactics” in working with national radicals. Earlier, they provided generous financial support; now, they are launching criminal investigations against them in the hope of driving them to negotiate with the powers that be. But this shift may be proving counter-productive, Kurpas suggested. On the one hand, it suggests the Russian authorities are afraid of them. And on the other, it may help them attract new members: Over the last 18 months, he says, the number of people in such organizations has “almost doubled”.

And fourth, in addition to those who are receiving paramilitary instruction in Russia but had not been sent to Ukraine are those who have gone there on their own and then they returned with their ideas and their weapons. “The Russian special services are trying to stop this flow, but such organizations do not exist on their own: they have overseers who know all the ins and outs”. Kyiv has to deal with the challenge presented by the Right Sector, Kurpas concluded, but Russia may face an even larger problem of a similar kind, one made larger by its past and present policies not only inside the borders of Ukraine but inside the Russian Federation as well. And the latter may prove the biggest of all (Kurpas, 2015).

Nevertheless, perhaps the clearest indication of the difficulties the Kremlin faces in trying to promote only its version of identity and the ways in which media campaigns are not enough is provided by Dmitry Demushkin, a radical Russian nationalist, who suggested that the Kremlin is so obsessed with control, he told two *Kavkazskaya Politika* interviewers, that it is now persecuting with searches and arrests even those who support it but who are not under its total and complete control, actions which in his view undermine the interests of the state and of Russia as a whole. At the present time, he added, “the Kremlin simply persecutes nationalists, and the power structures threaten them, independent of the position of the nationalist on any particular question [such as Ukraine]. You can even glorify Putin, but this is no guarantee that you won’t be arrested or treated illegally. One must love Putin only with permission” (Goble, 2015).

In a comment for Moscow’s “New Times,” Russian commentator Yekaterina Schulmann provided perhaps the most thoughtful discussion to date of the state of play concerning Russian national identity and the role of the state in promoting or retarding it. She argued that “the situation of the nationalist movement is mysterious” because it hasn’t been able to take off despite almost all the advantages it currently appears to have given the kind of propaganda that the official media have been conducting (Schulmann, 2015).

The Russian authorities have cracked down on Russian nationalist groups as hard and in much the same ways as they have come down on liberal ones: making it difficult for them to register, searching their offices, and bringing charges of extremism against the leaders and followers of their organizations. The immediate explanation for this is obvious, Schulmann said: “an authoritarian regime, built on civic passivity (and not on mobilization as a totalitarian one is) is equally hostile to independent political activity on any front,” regardless of whether that activity is nominally pro-government. But there are deeper reasons involved as well, she pointed out. “The nationalist movement in Russia from the times of Pamyat finds itself in strange symbiotic relations with the special services and higher political management which protect the nationalists,” although “from time to time” cracking the whip to show who is in charge of whom. “The most radical example of these anti-natural ties,” Schulmann suggested, “is the story of BORN (the Militant Organization of Russian Nationalists), but there are other similar cases” involving contract murders and the like (Schulmann, 2015).

Moreover, as she noted, the links between the Russian nationalists and the regime work against the interests of the former. Whatever “illusions” they have about those in power, Russian nationalists have to face the fact that these ties not only require the regime to lash out against them periodically but also “deprive the movement as a whole of any chance at legalization”. Only by securing legalization and thus the right to act in “the open political space” can the Russian nationalists escape from under the regime and have “a chance for real political influence, rather than living with eternal expectations that today or tomorrow, Ivan Ivanovich will be called to save Russia.”

Why then do the Russian nationalists agree to be “sheep for the shearing” by the authorities? Schulmann suggested that the answer likely is that there is less demand for the ideas of ethnic Russian nationalism in Russia than many of those arguing for it think and that the nationalists are being used to build up Putin’s image as the only one who can stop Russian fascism. “If the Ukrainian events really had raised up the ballyhooed nationalist wave, it would have brought to the surface some new actors; and no level of control by the authorities would have interfered,” Schulmann argued. But that didn’t happen, and the ultimate reason it didn’t points to an even deeper explanation.

That lies with “the common distortion of our political space, its closed nature, its lack of freedom and the absence of competition,” she said. “In the interests of stability of the political system and societal security, [it would be far better if there appeared] legal nationalist parties along with freedom of political competition as a whole.” “Everything that is driven into the underground tends to be radicalized,” Schulmann concluded, and “the best medicine against extremism is legalization and open political participation,” rather than the suppression of one or another group in the name of preventing just that outcome (*Ibid.*).

Another Russian commentator, Kseniya Kirillova (2015), also rooted the problems of the evolution of Russian identity in the tensions between free and unfree societies. In the former, she pointed out, people change and evolve and have so many



identities that it is difficult to predict which identity will matter and how any given individual will behave. “This is one of the reasons,” she argued, “why the Russian authorities so fear freedom” and why they seek to impose a single identity whose contents they have defined rather than allowing individuals a choice in the matter. As she said, Moscow has tried to drive everyone into “a ghetto” where he or she has only one identity and not a multiplicity of them.

In contrast to the authorities in free societies, the Russian ones conceive each identity as “fatal,” and therefore they seek to define it with precision. Thus, in their understanding, “a Russian is Orthodox” and ‘a defender of human rights is an agent of the US, and enemy of Russia, not a patriot, “a liberal,” and an enemy of the Church.”

There are, of course, several problems with such insistence. On the one hand, every individual is more than one thing and therefore has more than one identity. Imposing a single identity as defined by the state inevitably creates tensions that can be kept in check only by the enormous use of force. And on the other hand, the Russian state keeps changing both the preferred identities and their specific content, thus posing challenges to groups which feel that their identities are threatened or who disagree with one or another part of the definition that the Russian authorities are insisting upon and leading both them and the supporters of changes to be more aggressive.

The rewards of successfully imposing identities on people came to both the Soviet rulers in the past and Russian ones in the future, leaving the population easier to manipulate. But at the same time, the dangers of doing so have been on display as well, leading to the demise of the USSR and now new tensions within Russian society.

What those could look like is very much on public view today. Speaking in Perm, Damir Mukhetdinov (2015), the first deputy chairman of the Muslim Spiritual Directorate (MSD) of Russia, denounced the Kremlin's efforts to impose its notion of “a Russian world” and to insist on the acceptance of the way the regime defines it. The Muslim leader pointed out that the Russian constitution specifies that there cannot be a state ideology, but “in fact, in the ruling elite is being developed and worked out a proto-ideology, the basic formula of which is the restoration of the Russian world”. Such a definition does not take the Muslim population into account.

Indeed, he continued, “numerous problems in the country are not being resolved precisely because at the level of strategic thought there is the idea that “there is no Islam in the future of Russia”. But Islam is very much part of Russia's present and future and efforts to define it on the basis of thinkers from the past are dangerous. “The ‘Russian idea’ of Dostoyevsky, Ilin or Berdyaev, the Slavophilism of Danilevsky and Leontyev, and the Eurasianism of Savitsky and Trubetskoy are beautiful examples of historiosophic thoughts, but they were expressed for the past and not for the present day,” whatever the Kremlin ideologists think. Indeed, in reporting Mukhetdinov's comments, Ekho Moskvyy noted that “the representatives of the powers have not commented on them” (Echo Moskvyy, 2015). But they will soon have to – and not just about those of this Muslim leader but also about those of others, Russian and non-Russian, who do not see themselves as a part of Putin's “Russian world.”

In the course of his war in Ukraine, Putin has secured high levels of expressed approval from Russians for his policies there, but it is far from clear that he has solidified Russian national identity. Indeed, it seems as divided and weak as it was five years ago, a situation that the most thoughtful observers in Moscow expect to continue, all of the Kremlin leader's bombastic statements notwithstanding. One of the most thoughtful of these is Aleksey Malashenko, a scholar at the Moscow Carnegie Center.

He argued that it will take “at a minimum two generations” for the various identities in the Russian Federation to come together to form a united civic nation, a process that will be all the more prolonged because except in the major cities, the country does not have a civil society, adding that at present “it is impossible to say” just what “this substrate” of “[non-ethnic] Russian identity will look like.” But “we don't live in the clouds or behind an iron curtain,” and therefore it will reflect not only domestic but various international trends. (Malashenko, 2013).

Malashenko observed that “the USSR fell apart because Tajikistan and Estonia could not have a common flag. Can the Far East and Chechnya perhaps have one?” More than half of Russians do not currently think that Chechnya and Daghestan are really part of Russia, and more than one in four say the same thing about Tatarstan. There is some common identity among non-ethnic Russians, but it is quite thin. Consequently, the Moscow scholar says, he is quite skeptical about the prospects for the term “rossiyane,” the Russian term for those who identify as Russians but not only or not at all in ethnic terms.

Whether a Soviet people existed is something in the past, something he is not prepared to say, Malashenko said, although he pointed out that far more was done by the Soviet state and the CPSU to impose it than is currently being contemplated by the Russian authorities. Instead, the latter say that “civic values must unite us”. But those “can arise only where there is a civil society”. It exists in part in Moscow and the major cities but where else? Instead, “everyone living in our country which only recently appeared on the map is occupied with the formation of his own identity, the identity of his family and of his children” (Malashenko, 2013).

Some people in Russia today are pushing a Eurasian identity. But “ask a Russian, a Tatar or an Avar if he considers himself to be an Asian or a Euro-Asian,” Malashenko suggests. “Hardly anyone will answer ‘yes’ definitively”. People understand Europe and Asia, “but a ‘Eurasian perestroika’ is not understandable *a priori*.” Instead, there is in it “something false”. Almost the same thing can be said about attempts to push an imperial identity. For many, the empire is equivalent to the borders of the USSR. But that state did not last very long, at least in terms of universal history, and consequently it cannot provide the basis for a new identity within the Russian Federation's current borders.

Moreover, Malashenko argued that “Russia is a country of regions just as America is a country of states”. And while the residents of some US states don't like the residents of other states, the existence of the states holds the country together precisely because of their diversity. But “in Russia, its regions divide” the country because Moscow does not want to recognize

the diversity. “What do Russia's regions want? That they be allowed to live as they want. They want to be respected and taken into consideration. It is awful to think but they want to choose their own governors.” In short, Malashenko said, “the regions want normal relations” with the center, they want the federalism that is enshrined in the constitution.

But the central authorities “fear federalism”. They offer assistance in exchange for loyalty, and they are unwilling to divide authority. “It is not easy” to do that, Malashenko continued, “but without it, Russia will not correspond to its official name, the Russian Federation.” The reason the central authorities fear federalism is not so much that they think there will be a new “parade of sovereignties” about which so much ink has been spilled but rather “the authorities are afraid that under federalism they will remain without power,” that federalism with its clear division of powers will prevent them from exercising hands’ on power.

Consequently, Moscow refuses to cede any powers, and over time, “local self-consciousness intensifies in the regions, and ethno-religious self-consciousness intensifies in the national republics”. That wouldn't be a problem if the vectors of both paralleled that of the country as a whole. But in Russia today, that is often not the case. Islamic self-identification does not correspond to a civic Russian one, the Moscow scholar continues. It “exists independently and is linked more closely to processes taking place in the world's Islamic umma”. That is something that is “completely explicable”.

But, he pointed out, “much more challenging” is “the aggressive self-identification of [ethnic] Russian regions, including the so-called resource rich ones”. This phenomenon includes a Siberian identity “with its slogan of ‘stop feeding Moscow.’” Moreover, there is a Kaliningrad identity, a Far Eastern identity, and “even” a St. Petersburg identity. This list could be extended because it reflects a survival from the recent demise of the Soviet Union. After 1991, people asked who should be feeding whom, an indication that they no longer felt a common responsibility. But it is important, Malashenko continued, not to “exaggerate” this.

Those regions are focusing on themselves in the first instance “not separatism. It is only to put it more politely [their] sense of being ‘not Russia.’ The regions live separately from the capital.” They may or may not be going anywhere, but “Russia as before bears the burden of its unnaturally enormous space, which alas is half destroyed”. This space can be “knitted together” again only by forming “for all parts of the country a mutually rewarding from the point of view of economic interests and political demands path of development”. If that does not happen, the Moscow scholar suggested, then instead, there will “immediately appear several paths – Siberian, Kaliningrad's, Muscovite – and if you look out still further, Orthodox and Islamic”.

Thus it is ironic that a war Vladimir Putin launched in order to demonstrate the strength of Russian national identity has revealed its fragility and one that was predicated on the notion that Ukrainian identity was non-existence has shown that it is far stronger than its Russian counterpart.

## References

- Akhmetov, R., 2014. September 25–October 1 *Zvezda Povolzhya* 35 (715), 1–2 (passim).
- Bryzgalo, A., 2014. Russky mir: Kto i kak sobiraetsya vozrodit' v strane russkuyu identichnost'. National'ny aktsent. November 17, 2014 at: [nazaccent.ru/content/13879-russkij-mir.html](http://nazaccent.ru/content/13879-russkij-mir.html).
- Cherepov, S., 2015. “Segodnya ochen' vazhno skazat chem russkiye olitchayutsya ot nerusskikh. Profil. January 21, 2015 at: [profile.ru/rossiya/item/91315-segodnya-ochen-vazhno-skazat-chem-russkie-otlichayutsya-ot-nerusskikh](http://profile.ru/rossiya/item/91315-segodnya-ochen-vazhno-skazat-chem-russkie-otlichayutsya-ot-nerusskikh).
- Fedorov, V., 2013. Sexual Orientation, Ethnicity Key for Russian National Identity – Poll. Sputnik. September 11, 2013 at: [en.rian.ru/russia/20130911/183346419/Sexual-Orientation-Ethnicity-Key-for-Russian-National-Identity-Poll.html](http://en.rian.ru/russia/20130911/183346419/Sexual-Orientation-Ethnicity-Key-for-Russian-National-Identity-Poll.html).
- Goble, P.A., 1990. Sowjetstaat und russischer Nationalismus. In: Kappeler, Andreas (Ed.), *Die Russen. Ihr Nationalbewußtsein in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Köln, pp. 91–101.
- Goble, P., 2013. Fewer than half of RF citizens see themselves as ‘Civic’ rather than ethnic Russians. Window Eurasia. June 29, 2013 at: [windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2013/06/window-on-eurasia-fewer-than-half-of-rf.html](http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2013/06/window-on-eurasia-fewer-than-half-of-rf.html).
- Goble, P., 2015. Putin targets all russian nationalists He doesn't control, Dymushkin says. Interpreter. March 28, 2015 at: [interpretermag.com/putin-targets-all-russian-nationalists-he-doesnt-control-dymushkin-says/](http://interpretermag.com/putin-targets-all-russian-nationalists-he-doesnt-control-dymushkin-says/).
- Kirillova, K., 2015. Pochemu rossiyani tak legko manipulirovat. Novy Region-2, March 13, 2015, at: [nr2.com.ua/blogs/Ksenija\\_Kirillova/Pochemu-rossiyani-tak-legko-manipulirovat.92062.html](http://nr2.com.ua/blogs/Ksenija_Kirillova/Pochemu-rossiyani-tak-legko-manipulirovat.92062.html).
- Kuchma, L., 2003. Ukraina ne Rossia (Ukraine Is Not Russia) 2003. *Vremya*, Moscow.
- Kupras, A., 2015. Poluchit li Rossiya svoj ‘Pravyi sector. (Kyiv) Delovaya stolitsa. July 24, 2015 at: [dsnews.ua/world/kogda-rossiya-poluchit-svoy-pravyi-sektor-24072015101100](http://dsnews.ua/world/kogda-rossiya-poluchit-svoy-pravyi-sektor-24072015101100).
- Malashenko, A., 2013. V poiskakh nesamobytnoy identichnosti. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, October 8, 2013 at: [ng.ru/ng\\_politics/2013-10-08/9\\_identity.html](http://ng.ru/ng_politics/2013-10-08/9_identity.html).
- Moskvy, Echo, 2015. В Духовном управлении Мусульман России раскритиковали концепцию так называемого ‘Русского Мира’. March 13, 2015. <http://echo.msk.ru/news/1510590-echo.html>.
- Mukhetdinov, D., 2015. V Dуховном управлении musul'man Rossii raskritikovali kontseptsiyu tak nazyvayemogo ‘Russkogo mira’. Ekho Moskvy. March 13, 2015 at: [echo.msk.ru/news/1510590-echo.html](http://echo.msk.ru/news/1510590-echo.html).
- Nicholson, A., 2003. Kuchma Shows Ukraine Is Not Russia at: [www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/Kuchma-shows-ukraine-is-not-russia/236119.html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/Kuchma-shows-ukraine-is-not-russia/236119.html).
- Schulmann, E., 2015. Natsionalizm i problema politicheskogo uchastiya. (Moscow) *Novoye vremya* 30 (379) at: [newtimes.ru/articles/detail/101938/](http://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/101938/).
- Svyatenkov, P., 2014. Krizis natsionalizma. APN. November 17, at: [apn.ru/publications/article32660.htm](http://apn.ru/publications/article32660.htm).
- Vandyshcheva, O., 2014. Radi chego rossiyane gotoy idti na zhertvy. Expert Online, April 23, 2014 at: [expert.ru/2014/04/23/rossiyane-hotyat-blagopoluchiya-v-silnom-gosudarstve/](http://expert.ru/2014/04/23/rossiyane-hotyat-blagopoluchiya-v-silnom-gosudarstve/).

## Further reading

- “Grazhdanin Sibiri”, 2011. Rus. Rep. 7 (185) at: [m.expert.ru/russian\\_reporter/2011/07/grazhdanin-sibiri/](http://m.expert.ru/russian_reporter/2011/07/grazhdanin-sibiri/).
- Russky mir: Kto i kak sobiraetsya vozrodit' v strane russkuyu identichnost'. National'ny aktsent, November 17, 2014 at: [nazaccent.ru/content/13879-russkij-mir.html](http://nazaccent.ru/content/13879-russkij-mir.html).