



**HAL**  
open science

## Russian nationalism

Jules Sergei Fediunin

► **To cite this version:**

Jules Sergei Fediunin. Russian nationalism. Graeme Gill (ed.). Routledge Handbook of Russian Politics and Society, Routledge, pp.437-448, 2022, Routledge Handbooks, 9781032110523. 10.4324/9781003218234-42 . hal-04335877

**HAL Id: hal-04335877**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04335877v1>**

Submitted on 11 Dec 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Jules Sergei Fediunin, "Russian Nationalism" (chapter 38), in Graeme Gill (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Russian Politics and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London, Routledge, 2023, p. 437–448.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003218234-42

## **Introduction**

Nationalism seems to be omnipresent in today's Russia. It has become a salient social force and a key topic of public debate. But what is commonly referred to as "Russian nationalism" is a multifaceted and fragmented phenomenon. It would therefore be more accurate to speak of Russian nationalisms. In this chapter, I follow Smith's (1991: 73) definition of nationalism as both an ideology and a movement that acts on behalf of an actual or potential "nation" in order to maintain its autonomy, unity and identity. This definition focuses on national projects shaped and carried out by a number of actors in accordance with their – often competing – visions of the Russian nation, including nation-building efforts by the state leadership.

There are two main dimensions along which one can differentiate the many faces of contemporary Russian nationalism. The first is relational and classifies perceptible nationalisms by looking at their relationship to political power. Here, one can distinguish between state (or official) nationalism and its grassroots (or societal) forms (Pain 2018). Laruelle (2009, 2017, 2018) proposes a more detailed classification focusing on three types of actors promoting the nationalist agenda: state, para-state and non-state actors. The second dimension is ideological. Here, the main distinction is between two ideal types of nationalism: the first is ethnic or ethnocentric, the second is imperialist or statist (Kolstø 2016, 2019; Pain and Prostakov 2014). Indeed, since the mid-nineteenth century, Russian nationalism has oscillated between the temptation to form a nation-state, which favours the interests of the dominant ethnic group, and the imperial ideal, which is based on a desire to dominate areas and populations that are ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse. These two models compete with each other but also coexist to some degree. Nevertheless, it seems important to distinguish them analytically, as the former emphasises the (ethnic) nation, whose interests may (or should) take precedence over the state, while the latter considers the maintenance of the state to be a central value and refuses to separate the nationalist agenda from state interests. The latter nationalism is more inclined to present itself under the label of "patriotism". [437]

## **Russia's ongoing nation-building**

According to Hosking (1997), the construction of an imperial state in Russia obstructed nation-building. Arguably, Russia has never been a nation-state, while the Soviet Union was a huge multinational entity. Of course, the population of the Russian Federation as it emerged from the collapse of the USSR in December 1991 was much less heterogeneous than that of the USSR in the late 1980s: whereas ethnic Russians comprised just over 50 percent of the Soviet population in 1989, they represented 80 percent of the inhabitants of post-Soviet Russia. But alongside the majority group, the 2010 census counted 30 million people who belong to one of 190 other "nationalities". Of these, up to 20 million adhere to Islam or are culturally Muslim.

Even in its current borders, the Russian state encompasses regions that were initially brought into it by conquest or by more or less voluntary consent. These regions, which were given the status of autonomous territories in the early Soviet era and have since become known as “republics” (*respubliki*), are home to highly concentrated ethnic communities with languages, cultures and customs that differ from those of the country’s ethnic majority. The persistent gap between *ethnos* and *demos* – the ethnocultural community and the community of citizens – is anchored in terminology and public debate: what is “Russian” (*ruskii*, the noun and adjective relating to language, culture or ethnicity) is not equal to what is “of Russia” (*rossiiskii*, the adjective relating to the state and public sphere). In the early 1990s, President Boris Yeltsin chose to promote a more inclusive conception of nationhood, as reflected in the name of the state – it is a Russian Federation (*Rossiiskaya Federatsiya*) that rests on a community of fellow citizens (*rossiyane* or *grazhdane Rossii*), as opposed to the unified Russian state (*Russkoe gosudarstvo*) claimed by Russian nationalists of different kinds (Breslauer and Dale 1997). In 1997, the Soviet-era “fifth point” listing the official ethnicity (*natsional’nost’*) of each citizen was removed from the Russian passport in order to weaken the link between ethnicity and citizenship. However, as Goode (2019) argues, the Yeltsin administration failed to shape a coherent civic nation-building project due to the institutional instability and personalist dynamics of the Russian regime. Indeed, while the government entity charged with the promotion of civic nationhood was reformed eight times between 1992 and 2000, it was never endowed with broad powers or substantial funding. Meanwhile, as Yeltsin sought to respond to the rise of communist and nationalist opposition inside the country, he made numerous public references to ethnic Russians who found themselves outside the Russian Federation after 1991.

Since Putin’s accession to the presidency, the Russian authorities’ nation-building efforts have remained contradictory and ambiguous (Shevel 2011). First, the Russian leadership prefers not to choose between several rival visions of the nation. The official discourse sees Russia as both a civic nation and an ethnic or cultural nation. The latter may be alternately understood as a community of Eastern Slavs (with Russians, Ukrainians and Belorussians depicted as a “common people”) and as a Russian-speaking cultural or historical nation, regardless of the ethnicity of its members. In both cases, the term *ruskii* is used to reinforce the historical unity of Eastern Slavs – especially in the context of the 2014 Ukraine crisis – and to foster links with the Russian diaspora in the former USSR and beyond. The diaspora is understood as a “Russian world” (*Russkii mir*) whose role is to certify Russia’s great power status and strengthen its influence over “compatriots” and governments in diaspora members’ countries of residence (Degirmen Dysart 2021; Suslov 2018). It is thus not surprising that use of the term *ruskii* significantly increased during Putin’s third presidential term (2012–18) (Blakkisrud 2016).

The ambiguity about the definition of the national community is also reproduced in official documents. One instance of this is the fuzzy definition of “compatriots” in the 1999 Russian law, amended in 2010, that allows Russian policy-makers to target a variety of sub-groups of [438] former Soviet citizens or Russian émigrés on the basis of ethnic, linguistic, religious or professional characteristics (Shevel 2011). Another example is the Strategy of the State Nationalities Policy, adopted in December 2012 and amended in 2018, which emphasises “the unifying role of the Russian (*ruskii*) people” and the importance of “Russian cultural dominance” in keeping the country together. In 2020, this thesis was introduced, among many other amendments, into the Russian Constitution. The new wording of Article 68-1 reads: “The official language of the Russian Federation across the whole of its territory shall be Russian, as the

language of the state-bearing people which is an integral part of the multinational union of equal peoples of the Russian Federation" (State Duma 2020).

Second, the shape of the *rossiiskii* project remains vague. It is still unclear whether the proclaimed civic community is ultimately composed of (a) fellow citizens loyal to the state institutions and enjoying equal rights or (b) indigenous ethnic groups – a "(civic) nation of (ethnic) nations", in the words of academician and foremost exponent of the project Valery Tishkov (2013). After all, both definitions of civic nationhood have been challenged in practice.

The individualistic dimension of the civic national project is undermined by two major factors. The first is widespread xenophobia that targets visible minorities, commonly referred to as "people of non-Slavic appearance" (Levada Center 2018). Minorities perceived as "culturally foreign" – whether indigenous (such as people of North Caucasian origin) or recent immigrants (such as people from Central Asia) – face stigmatisation and vigilante violence. Examples include the riots that took place in Kondopoga, Karelia, in 2006, and in Biryulevo, a southern suburb of Moscow, in 2013 (Arnold 2016; Larys 2019). The second is the lack of both political participation and trust in public institutions. The vast majority of Russians are unwilling to participate in political life and do not believe they have any influence over decision-making at the local, regional or federal level (Levada Center 2021a). Over 50 percent of respondents do not trust the police or regional and local authorities, while distrust of the government, parliament and political parties stands above 60 percent (Levada Center 2020).

The multiculturalist dimension of the *rossiiskii* project is also compromised. While the Yeltsin administration took a *laissez-faire* approach, the federal centre has implemented a strict policy of legal, administrative and fiscal recentralisation since the early 2000s (Rutland 2010). The Putin administration may not have dared to simply abolish ethnic federalism – in spite of calls by nationalist actors such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy for it to do so – but it worked to bring the status of Russia's republics closer to that of the "pure" administrative regions. More recently, this centralising policy has been imbued with a cultural unification component. In 2015 the Russian Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Russian Historical Society prepared a national "cultural-historical standard". This standard prescribes the integration of regional narratives into a single historical narrative to be taught in all public schools across Russia. Particular emphasis is placed on patriotism, which should be instilled in pupils using the examples of "mass heroism" and "unity of peoples" that were demonstrated by the Russians in the face of such external threats as the Patriotic War of 1812 (Napoleon's Russian campaign) and the Great Patriotic War of 1941–5. In order to be approved by the Ministry of Education, school textbooks should refer to the "joining" (*prisoedinenie*), not the "conquest" (*zavoevanie*), of the Kazan Khanate or the North Caucasus, as well as the "joining", not the "annexation", of Crimea in March 2014. Another controversial decision, announced by Putin in 2017 and enshrined in law the following year, was to end the compulsory teaching of minority languages by schools situated in the Federation's republics. This decision has been criticised as contrary to the principles of federalism, since it clearly challenges republics' language and cultural policies (Bowring 2018). Moreover, it contradicts the official discourse of Russia as a "multiethnic [439] and multifaith" state and is part of a more general "dilution of diversity" in Putin's Russia (Prina 2016).

Finally, it is worth noting that the civic nation-building project is far from consensual in today's Russia. The very concept of a *rossiiskaya* nation is highly contested by numerous actors. For

Russian nationalists, it is a reincarnation of the notion of the “Soviet people” (*sovetskii narod*) and therefore a tool being used to “dilute” Russians into a multinational entity instead of recognising their dominant status and/or granting them special rights within the state. For their part, many spokespeople of minorities fear that the promotion of the idea of a *rossiiskaya natsiya* poses a threat to their ethnic nations. The concept is also unpopular within the Russian Orthodox Church and among the systemic opposition, notably Gennady Zyuganov’s Communist Party (KPRF) and Zhirinovskiy’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), which traditionally appeal to the *russkii* people. More broadly, the term *rossiiskii/rossiyanin* is often perceived as dry, artificial and lacking real meaning, in contrast to the word *russkii*, which predominates in everyday usage (Blackburn 2021). These considerations led Putin to abandon the idea of enshrining in law the concept of a united civic nation, a step proposed by the members of the Presidential Council for Interethnic Relations in 2016.

It seems clear that the Russian state remains in an ambiguous position when it comes to nation-building. While it situates itself as the creator of a nation on its own terms which tends to be multiethnic but Russocentric, it avoids any effort to clarify the symbolic – and geographic – boundaries of the national community.

### **What place for nationalism in the ideological construction of the Putin regime?**

To understand the Russian leadership’s attitude towards nationalism, several aspects thereof must be taken into account. First, there is the terminological component. Officially, the government espouses “patriotism”, not “nationalism”. In Russian official parlance, as in many Western countries, “nationalism” has negative connotations, while “patriotism” is considered a civic duty even if, in daily life, it is often ethnicised (Goode 2018). Under Putin, patriotism has emerged as the “national idea” for which Yeltsin had been searching since the mid-1990s. Second, since his rise to power, Putin has focused on the state rather than the nation (Putin 1999). For him and his inner council, the state embodies and gives shape to the nation. Unsurprisingly, the Russian authorities reject ethnonationalism insofar as it threatens the integrity of the state. Third, the official emphasis on “statism” and “patriotism” allows the regime to generate broad political support, especially among the working and middle classes, rival visions of the national community notwithstanding. Both the strengthening of the common state and commitment to the country are considered to be a source of social consensus across the internal divisions – geographical, ethnic, religious and economic – within Russian society (Laruelle 2009).

Official nationalism as a general framework is combined with some ideological content, notably conservatism and anti-Westernism. Since the 2000s, the ruling United Russia party has referred to itself in terms of centrism and conservatism. This latter notion is a catch-all term used to denote “stability”, as opposed to the “chaos” of the 1990s; to promote the idea of Russian historical and cultural specificity; to craft a memorial reconciliation between “Reds” and “Whites” (the Soviet and Tsarist periods); and, finally, to set up a form of militarised patriotic education centred on the commemoration of the Second World War. Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012 marked a new “conservative turn” in Russian politics, with official conservatism now also applying to social issues. A series of restrictive laws have since been adopted [440] to strengthen so-called “spiritual bonds” and “traditional values”, including a law that penalises “homosexual propaganda towards minors” and another that punishes “offenses against religious feelings”. In

2020, conservative values including patriotism, faith in God and the definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman were enshrined in the Russian Constitution.

In its promotion of conservatism, the Russian leadership is assisted by a number of para-state actors. The most visible of these are the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and its public figures, including Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Tikhon. In 2015, the latter, who is often referred to as Putin's personal confessor, initiated a series of permanent public exhibitions entitled "Russia – My History". The project, which promotes a historical narrative of unity and continuity, benefits from the financial and administrative support of the state (Klimenko 2021). On the regional level, the ROC's role in promoting conservative values is replicated by other "traditional confessions", namely "official" Islam (as opposed to Salafism), Buddhism and Judaism; it is likewise embraced by Cossack organisations, including para-state Cossack militias. The national-conservative agenda is also amplified both domestically and internationally by "Orthodox businessmen" like Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev. These two men pre-side over religious foundations named for St Andrew the First and St Basil the Great, respectively, and cultivate a sense of nostalgia for the Tsarist period. Malofeev is also the founder of the TV channel Tsar'grad (a historical Russian name for Constantinople) and the head of the organisation of the same name (previously the Double-Headed Eagle Society), which claims to be the heir to the Black Hundreds of the early twentieth century and whose monarchical, imperial and Orthodox principles it shares. Finally, a large group of patriotic conservatives gather around the Izborsky Club, launched in 2012 by the writer Aleksandr Prokhanov, an adherent of Russian pro-Soviet imperialist nationalism. These actors are partly co-opted by the regime, have access to official media and seek to influence the decision-making process, with varying degrees of success (Laruelle 2016b). They also contribute to maintaining a "neo-conservative consensus" in Russia (Melville 2020).

The other ideological pillar of Russian official nationalism is anti-Westernism. In the early 2000s, Vladimir Putin had a reputation for being a rather pro-Western leader, especially against the background of the rhetoric of the communist and "patriotic" opposition. Over time, however, the West has come to embody the external enemy in official Russian discourse. In the mid-2000s, Vladislav Surkov, one of the architects of the Putin regime, theorised an authoritarian vision of democracy that is supposed to reflect Russia's uniqueness. This "sovereign democracy" is supposedly led by a "nationally minded" elite charged with ensuring the economic independence, military strength and cultural identity of the state in a globalised world (Krastev 2007). Moreover, it is supposed to be the answer to foreign (read: Western) threats to Russia and its regional security, such as "colour revolutions" and, as first attested by Putin's Munich speech of February 2007, NATO expansion in the post-Soviet space. Although it gained significant publicity at the time, this notion never really attained official status.

After the failure of the United States' "Russian reset" policy of 2009–13, the Russian leadership reconsidered its attitude towards the West. Since that time, it has sought to craft a "state-civilisation" based on non-Western/non-liberal values (Tsygankov 2016). In the process, the Russian regime has relied on a heterogeneous discourse of "civilisational nationalism" (Verkhovskii and Pain 2012). Some of its spokespeople, such as Aleksandr Dugin, a key thinker of the Russian radical right who is the father of "neo-Eurasianism" and a member of both the Izborsky Club and the Tsar'grad Society, consider the West to be Russia's sworn enemy on geopolitical grounds. Others, such as Natalia Narochitskaya, a conservative historian who served

as director of the Russia-funded and Paris-based Institute of Democracy and Cooperation, see it as the embodiment of a materialistic mentality incompatible with Russian spirituality. [441] Western liberalism is depicted as “Russophobic” (one of the key terms of Russian nationalism) and hostile to Russian national interests.

Russian authorities borrow from the discourse of “civilisational nationalism” when they reject the Western path of development for Russia and denounce liberal values. However, they seem to oscillate between two other “civilisational grammars” that structure Russian identity debates (Laruelle 2016a). The first grammar depicts Russia as a European country that does not follow the Western model of development (a conservative vision inherited from Slavophilism), while the second conveys a vision of Russia as a non-European country and a distinct civilisation, whether Slavic, Orthodox or Eurasian. Both narratives are present in the official discourse, and both thrive on anti-Western sentiments. But the former seems more consensual among Russian elites, as it depicts Russia as the other, “true” Europe committed to its traditional values: Christian morality as opposed to the LGBT rights espoused by liberal “Gayropa” (Riabov and Riabova 2015) and loyalty to the nation as opposed to the European Union project of political integration and “multiculturalism”. This grammar has enabled the Russian leadership to move away from its inferiority complex, which was very pronounced in the early 1990s, to express a genuine superiority complex in the 2010s (Neumann 2016). In this regard, Russian national conservatism is similar to its counterparts in such Central and Eastern European countries as Hungary and Poland. Significantly, however, a decreasing number of Russians would describe their country as European: the share of respondents who said they considered Russia to be a European country declined from 52 percent in 2008 to 29 percent in 2021, while 27 percent of Russians polled in 2021 identified themselves as European, down from 35 percent in 2008 (Levada Center 2021b). In the context of the continuing political confrontation between Russia and Western states, some Russian experts talk about Russia’s “detachment” from Europe (Miller and Lukyanov 2017). These trends, reinforced by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and Russia’s growing isolation from the West, may lead to a further reconsideration of the Russian state’s position and a move towards a more exceptionalist, non-European identity.

Finally, Russian official nationalism can be understood as a technology of power that serves to legitimise the current regime and to generate mass loyalty to it. Hale (2016) argues that nationalism did not serve as a major source of legitimacy for President Putin and his regime before the 2014 Ukrainian crisis. Indeed, until the opposition protests of 2011–12, public support for the regime came from three sources all related to Putin’s personal appeal: economic prosperity (Putin as an “effective manager”), domestic order (Putin as a “strong man” who had managed to contain threats ranging from Chechen separatism to terrorism to foreign influence), and the demonstration of Russia’s “great power” status internationally (Hutcheson and Petersson 2016). It was only in 2014 that Putin explicitly played the nationalism card with the aim of renewing his repertoire of legitimacy. In the so-called Crimean speech of 18 March 2014, Putin reproduced the nationalist claim that the Russian (*ruskii*) people are “the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders” (Kremlin 2014). In a statement made at the 2014 Valdai Discussion Club meeting, Putin described himself as “the biggest nationalist” in Russia, thus temporarily hijacking the nationalist agenda. More broadly, in the wake of the Euromaidan revolution, Russian state-dominated media have deployed nationalist and patriotic rhetoric denouncing Ukrainian fascism, “Russophobia” and Western aggression. The annexation of Crimea was applauded by the vast majority of Russians – the exception being the liberal opposition designated by the

authorities as “traitors to the nation” (*natsional-predateli*) and “a fifth column” – and helped bolster Putin’s popularity, which had been eroded by the anti-regime protests, through the “rally-’round-the-leader” effect (Alexseev and Hale 2016). At the same time, as outlined above, the Russocentric trend in official nation-building became [442] more prominent. It is, however, arguable that the motives behind Russia’s decision to annex Crimea were mainly geopolitical, notably in relation to Moscow’s categorical rejection of Ukraine’s possible membership of NATO (Treisman 2018), rather than nationalist. Moreover, the Putin administration has not taken any further steps to embrace mass nationalist mobilisation due to fears that this would threaten the regime. Contrary to the claims made by many Russian nationalists, the Kremlin had long chosen not to recognise the Russia-backed separatist “republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk before eventually acknowledging them in February 2022. In doing so, the Putin regime escalated the low intensity conflict in Donbas into a war, justified both in terms of the “demilitarisation” of Ukraine and the defence of the Russian-speaking populations, who were allegedly the victims of discrimination and even genocide in Ukraine. The Russian leadership has once again mobilised the nationalist rhetoric by invoking the pre- 1917 triune Russian nation, shared even today by many Russian nationalists, and insisting on the “unhistorical” and “artificial” character of the Ukrainian state and its post-Soviet borders. Quite paradoxically, Putin’s “special military operation” has the stated aim of cleansing Ukraine of “aggressive nationalists” and “neo-Nazis”.

Within Russia, the Putin regime has constantly sought to maintain control over the nationalist camp by borrowing from its rhetoric and interacting with the various nationalist forces – sometimes through repression, sometimes through co-optation. This politics of “managed nationalism” (Horvath 2021) has become a perennial strategy of the Kremlin vis-à-vis non-state nationalist actors.

### **Opposition nationalism and the Kremlin’s strategy towards it**

Russian opposition nationalism can be visualised as a variety of circles that display varying degrees of loyalty to the Putin regime and to the Russian state. This is a dynamic ecosystem that has changed dramatically in the post-Soviet period. Two major developments have particularly affected the landscape of Russian nationalism since the 1990s. First, Russian nationalists’ focus has shifted away from imperialist stances – including the Communists’ desire to rebuild the Soviet Union and Zhirinovskiy’s expansionist claim to undertake “the last thrust to the South” (the title of his 1993 book) – towards ethnic issues within the country. This general trend of “ethnification” of Russian nationalism is mainly due to the formation of a new Russian diaspora in the former Soviet republics, the Chechen wars and the flow of labour migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus into Russia since 2000 (Kolstø 2016).

Second, anti-authoritarian and intellectually oriented trends have emerged in Russian nationalism. In the aftermath of the USSR’s collapse, Russian nationalists and patriotic forces, from pro-Soviet imperialists gathered around Prokhanov’s journal *Tomorrow (Zavtra)* to the LDPR and Aleksandr Barkashov’s Russian National Unity (*Russkoe natsional’noe edinstvo*), praised one or another form of dictatorship, whether communist, conservative or fascist. In the 2000s, while a significant share of the “left patriots” (or the “red-brown” alliance, in Russian liberal terminology), who strongly opposed President Yeltsin during the 1993 constitutional crisis and rallied around the KPRF, have been progressively incorporated into Putin’s regime as “systemic



opposition”, a new generation of Russian nationalists has adopted pro-democratic stances and rejected the “old patriotism” centred on the state rather than the (ethnic) nation.

The Russian nationalist milieu’s focus on ethnic issues dates back to the early 1990s. In 1993, the Congress of Russian Communities (KRO) was founded with the aim of uniting the Russian diaspora in the states of the former USSR. Chaired by Dmitry Rogozin, this organisation failed to develop into a mass movement. Although the diaspora theme was later reclaimed by the regime, mostly on a rhetorical level, and remains salient for all Russian nationalists, this [443] homeland nationalism has been partly pushed to the sidelines by an ethnic-core nationalism, which has been fuelled by the rise of xenophobia within Russian society. This is reflected in Rogozin’s own political trajectory: ten years after the founding of the KRO, he would, with the Kremlin’s patronage, launch the Fatherland (*Rodina*) party, whose ideology was based on a mix of socialism, statism and racism towards non-Slavic populations. Rogozin himself has been co-opted by the regime: in 2006, *Rodina* was merged into a new systemic opposition party, Just Russia (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*), and in 2008 Rogozin was appointed Russian ambassador to NATO before becoming Deputy Prime Minister overseeing the Russian defence and space industries.

In the 2000s, the rejection of “culturally alien” immigration has become the central theme of opposition nationalists’ ideology. Excluded from official politics, these actors have promoted a nativist reading of the slogan “Russia for Russians” (*Rossiya dlya russkikh*) and portrayed the dominant ethnicity as being threatened above all by immigration. One proponent of this ideology was the Movement against Illegal Immigration (DPNI), created in 2002 under the leadership of Aleksandr Belov (Potkin). By 2011, when a court banned it for “extremism”, the DPNI had become the most influential movement in Russian opposition nationalism. From the outset, it employed a very firm anti-immigration discourse inspired by the Western European radical right (Laruelle 2009: 74–9). It called for the closure of borders with the states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, considering immigration from these countries a fundamental threat to Russia and the main cause of social ills such as poverty, unemployment and (organised) crime. The DPNI also called for legal and social protection of the dominant ethnic group as one of the “native peoples” (*korennyye narody*) of Russia. Following the prohibition of the DPNI, the ethnonationalists launched the Russians (*Russkie*) movement, conceived as a federation of various nationalist organisations across the country. Led notably by Belov and Dmitry Demushkin, former leader of the neo-Nazi-inspired Slavic Union (*Slavyanskii soyuz*, shortened to “SS” in Russian), the new organisation was banned in 2015.

The denunciation of the “migratory occupation” and “de-Russification” of Russia has also become central to the so-called Russian Marches. Until the 2014 Ukrainian crisis these were nationalist rallies organised in Moscow, St Petersburg and other big Russian cities under the black-yellow-white flag (the so-called *imperka*) on 4 November, National Unity Day, established in 2005 in memory of Moscow’s liberation from foreign troops in 1612. In 2011, Russian ethnonationalists coined the slogan “Stop Feeding the Caucasus” to protest the budget transfers being made to the Muslim republics of the North Caucasus. This media campaign was then supported by Aleksei Navalny.

In parallel, new forms of Russian nationalism have emerged that are strenuously opposed to the Putin regime. The example of the national-democratic movement (or *nats-dem*) is emblematic in this respect. This movement has been theorised and promoted by the new generation of

nationalist thinkers who cluster, in particular, around the journal *Nationalism Issues* (*Voprosy natsionalizma*), founded in 2010. Konstantin Krylov (1967–2020), who served, among other roles, as the journal's editor-in-chief and chairman of the unregistered National Democratic Party, was commonly considered a leading figure of this strand of Russian nationalism, which is simultaneously democratic and pro-European but also xenophobic towards non-Slavic migrants. For the first time in the history of Russian nationalism, its proponents rejected the authoritarian state and embraced the values of democratic rule. While denouncing the Soviet project as harmful to Russian identity, culture and demography, the national-democrats also question the imperial heritage, seeing it as hostile to the wellbeing and vital interests of ethnic Russians (Torbakov 2015). In the place of the current Russian Federation, which they derisively call *Erefiya* ("RF-iya") instead of Russia, and its "phony" nationalism that seeks to hide [444] the kleptocratic nature of the regime, they propose a *ruskii* nation-state. In this reformed state the dominant ethnicity would finally enjoy all constitutional rights and freedoms, including the automatic right of all ethnic Russians to Russian citizenship and the right to keep and bear arms.

Opposition nationalists do not have access to official media, especially public television. They also suffer from a constant lack of financial resources. Nor have any anti-Putin nationalist parties been allowed to register. However, these actors are visible on the internet and social networks. The most prominent of these nationalist online resources was Sputnik and Pogrom, a fashionable site created in 2012 by the blogger Yegor Prosvirnin (1986–2021) with the aim of advancing "intellectual nationalism". The site was blocked, along with other nationalist resources, in July 2017 by decision of the Federal Service for the Supervision of Communications and Media (*Roskomnadzor*). However, this decision did not affect the oldest nationalist online platform, the Political News Agency (*Agentstvo politicheskikh novostei*), which now endorses the official discourse.

Both observers and nationalists themselves agree that Russian nationalism as a movement is currently in a deep crisis; in the eyes of some, it is in ruins (Goble 2016; Verkhovsky 2018). The 2014 Ukraine crisis created a schism in this world, radicalising the divisions between Russian nationalists, particularly those who supported the Kremlin and those who sided with the opposition (Horvath 2015). Even among the anti-Putin nationalists, some took an enthusiastic view of the Euromaidan as a model for Russia of a national and anti-authoritarian revolution, while others adopted the official narrative, which painted the revolution as a Russophobic and neo-fascist putsch. Reflecting these divisions, when Russian nationalist activists went to war in the Donbas, some joined the separatists and others the Ukrainian armed forces. Within Russia, the division over Ukraine and support for the Kremlin's foreign policy led to a drastic drop in the number of participants in the annual Russian Marches. The then-failure of the *Novorossiia* project in eastern Ukraine, as embodied by separatist warlord Igor Strelkov, disillusioned many Russian nationalists.

But the crisis of Russian nationalism cannot be laid entirely at the door of the Ukraine crisis. Indeed, it was already taking shape in the early 2010s. After the double murder of lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalist Anastasia Baburova in January 2009 by members of the underground Militant Organisation of Russian Nationalists (BORN) and the nationalist rally on Manezhnaya Square in Moscow in December 2010, the Russian regime hardened its attitude towards opposition and/or radical nationalists. In the wake of the Ukraine crisis, the Kremlin's tolerance for any political contention, especially nationalist, has further diminished (Laine 2017).

The regime thus launched a wave of repression targeting nationalist activists in order to weaken this once-growing movement. The best-known figures of radical Russian nationalism – including Demushkin, Belov and Maxim Martsinkevich, a neo-Nazi and anti- LGBT activist nicknamed “The Spiker” (*Tesak*) – have at various points found themselves behind bars. Belov and Demushkin were released in 2018 and 2019, respectively, but they are no longer engaged in nationalist activities. Martsinkevich was found dead in his prison cell in Chelyabinsk in September 2020. Others have preferred to leave Russia – these include Belov’s brother Vladimir Basmanov (Potkin), leader of the Nation and Freedom Committee, and Daniil Konstantinov, founder of the Russian-European Movement that brings together Russian political émigrés living in Europe (Yudina 2020). The state’s repressive policy has succeeded in forcing many nationalists back into the shadows and suspending their militant activities.

Having carried out a series of crackdowns on opposition nationalist movements, the Putin regime chose to link up with, and rely on, a series of para-state organisations that carry out the nationalist agenda. This strategy was first tested in the 2000s, when the presidential administration [445] supported the creation of several youth political organisations with a “moderately (ethno)nationalist” discourse, such as Ours (*Nashi*), The Young Guard (*Molodaya gvardiya*) and Young Russia (*Rossiya molodaya*), which were supposed to compete with such movements as the DPNI or Eduard Limonov’s National-Bolshevik Party. In 2007, United Russia launched an ideological discussion called “The Russian Project” (*Russkii projekt*) with the goal of strengthening the regime’s control over the nationalist agenda and taking the initiative from the radicals, who were depicted as “extremists” and “fascists”. In 2008–9, the Kremlin even manipulated Russian Form/Image (*Russkii obraz*), a neo-fascist organisation that collaborated with skinhead gangs and whose para-military wing was the BORN (Horvath 2021). This approach was replicated in the 2010s, but now the Russian authorities rely exclusively on nationalist organisations with “patriotic”, or statist, overtones (Laine 2017). These include the National Liberation Movement (NOD), founded by United Russia Duma deputy Evgeny Fedorov under the slogan “Fatherland, Freedom, Putin” and which proclaims its primary goal to be the liberation of the Russian state from the “colonial domination of the United States”, and the Rodina party, re-established in 2012 under the presidency of Duma deputy Aleksei Zhuravlev. In addition to this, there are a number of actors with diverse ideological orientations, including neo-Eurasianists, conservatives or “patriotic” bikers from Aleksandr Zaldostanov’s Night Wolves club, who come together under the common banner of “Anti-Maidan”, an informal movement with an anti- Western and pro-Putin slant. On the top of these are radical groupings such as SERB/YuVRB (South East Radical Block/*Yugo-vostochnyi radikal’nyi blok*), created in 2014 and probably linked to Russian law enforcement, which have participated, alongside NOD activists and Cossack militias, in the disruption of anti-Putin opposition rallies.

All these organisations, along with the Izborsky Club members, enthusiastically supported Putin’s decision to wage war on Ukraine at the end of February 2022 and actively participated in its justification within Russia. Other para-state actors, including the spokespeople of four “official confessions”, explicitly approved the “military operation”. In the light of these events, it seems probable that nationalist ideas, in their authoritarian and imperialist forms, will shape more intensively the Russian state’s decision-making to the point of becoming a part of official ideology.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that nationalism remains a central force in Russian politics and society. Since the 1990s, expressions of Russian nationalism have both multiplied and come to focus more heavily on ethnic issues. These expressions are, however, increasingly controlled by the authoritarian state, which seeks to use nationalism as an instrument of power. The Russian authorities thus aim to channel nationalist sentiments by combining them with conservative and anti-Western ideological content. This trend reached its peak in the early 2020s, as attested by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While borrowing from the discourse of opposition nationalism and co-opting nationalist opinion-makers, the Kremlin has succeeded in disqualifying nationalists, let alone pro-democracy ones, as a political movement, preventing them from posing what could be a dangerous challenge to Putin's rule.

However, the implementation of official nationalism poses risks to the status quo in the long term. On the one hand, the promotion of a Russocentric nation-building project under the guise of "multiethnic and multifaith" unity could lead to the rise of minority nationalisms in the event that the central government is weakened or regime change occurs. On the other hand, majority nationalism, although organisationally weak, has developed a relatively coherent ideology comparable to that of European national-populists and capable of mobilising the [446] population. Long-term factors such as immigration and interregional imbalances may support the revival of nationalism as a form of contentious politics in Russia.

## References

Alexseev, M. and H. Hale (2016), "Rallying Round the Leader More than the Flag: Changes in Russian Nationalist Public Opinion 2013–14", in P. Kolstø and H. Blakkisrud (eds.), *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism, 2000–15* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press): 192–220.

Arnold, R. (2016), *Russian Nationalism and Ethnic Violence: Symbolic Violence, Lynching, Pogrom and Massacre* (London: Routledge).

Blackburn, M. (2021), "Mainstream Russian Nationalism and the 'State-Civilization' Identity: Perspectives from Below", *Nationalities Papers* 49, 1: 89–107.

Blakkisrud, H. (2016), "Blurring the Boundary between Civic and Ethnic: The Kremlin's New Approach to National Identity under Putin's Third Term", in P. Kolstø and H. Blakkisrud (eds.), *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism, 2000–15* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press): 249–74.

Bowring, B. (2018), "Minority Language Rights in the Russian Federation: The End of a Long Tradition?", in G. Hogan-Brun and B. O'Rourke (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Minority Languages and Communities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan): 73–99.

Breslauer, G.W. and C. Dale (1997), "Boris Yel'tsin and the Invention of a Russian Nation-State", *Post-Soviet Affairs* 13, 4: 303–32.

Degirmen Dysart, B. (2021), "The Politics of Russian 'Diaspora': From Compatriots to a Russian World", *Turkish Journal of Diaspora Studies* 1, 1: 49–63.

- Goble, P. (2016), "Russian National Identity and the Ukrainian Crisis", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49, 1: 37–43.
- Goode, J.P. (2018), "Everyday Patriotism and Ethnicity in Today's Russia", in P. Kolstø and H. Blakkisrud (eds.), *Russia Before and After Crimea: Nationalism and Identity, 2010–2017* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press): 258–81.
- Goode, J.P. (2019), "Russia's Ministry of Ambivalence: The Failure of Civic Nation-Building in post-Soviet Russia", *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, 2: 140–60.
- Hale, H. (2016), "How Nationalism and Machine Politics Mix in Russia", in P. Kolstø and H. Blakkisrud (eds.), *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism, 2000–15* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press): 221–48.
- Horvath, R. (2015), "The Euromaidan and the Crisis of Russian Nationalism", *Nationalities Papers* 43, 6: 819–39.
- Horvath, R. (2021), *Putin's Fascists. Russkii Obraz and the Politics of Managed Nationalism in Russia* (London: Routledge).
- Hosking, G. (1997), *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917* (Cambridge [Mass]: Harvard University Press).
- Hutcheson, D.S. and B. Petersson (2016), "Shortcut to Legitimacy: Popularity in Putin's Russia", *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, 7: 1107–26.
- Klimenko, E. (2021), "Building the Nation, Legitimizing the State: Russia – My History and Memory of the Russian Revolutions in Contemporary Russia", *Nationalities Papers* 49, 1: 72–88.
- Kolstø, P. (2016), "The Ethnification of Russian Nationalism", in P. Kolstø and H. Blakkisrud (eds.), *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism, 2000–15* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press): 18–45.
- Kolstø, P. (2019), "Is Imperialist Nationalism an Oxymoron?", *Nations and Nationalism* 25, 1: 18–44.
- Krastev, I. (2007), "Russia as the 'Other Europe'", *Russia in Global Affairs* 5, 4: 66–78.
- Kremlin (2014), *Address by President of the Russian Federation*, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.
- Laine, V. (2017), "Contemporary Russian Nationalisms: The State, Nationalist Movements, and the Shared Space in between", *Nationalities Papers* 45, 2: 222–37.
- Laruelle, M. (2009), *In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Laruelle, M. (2016a), "Russia as an Anti-Liberal European Civilisation", in P. Kolstø and H. Blakkisrud (eds.), *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism, 2000–15* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press): 275–97. [447]

- Laruelle, M. (2016b), "The Izborsky Club, or the New Conservative Avant-Garde in Russia", *The Russian Review* 75, 4: 626–44.
- Laruelle, M. (2017), "Is Nationalism a Force for Change in Russia?", *Daedalus* 146, 2: 89–100.
- Laruelle, M. (2018), *Russian Nationalism: Imaginaries, Doctrines, and Political Battlefields* (New York: Routledge).
- Laryš, M. (2019), "Violent Attacks against Migrants and Minorities in the Russian Federation", in T. Bjørge and M. Mareš (eds.), *Vigilantism against Migrants and Minorities* (London: Routledge): 69–85.
- Levada Center (2018), "Monitoring ksenofobnykh nastroyeni, iyul' 2018 goda", [www.levada.ru/2018/08/27/monitoring-ksenofobskih-nastroenij/](http://www.levada.ru/2018/08/27/monitoring-ksenofobskih-nastroenij/).
- Levada Center (2020), "Doverie institutam", [www.levada.ru/2020/09/21/doverie-institutam/](http://www.levada.ru/2020/09/21/doverie-institutam/).
- Levada Center (2021a), "Politicheskoe uchastie i otnosheniya s gosudarstvom v Rossii", [www.levada.ru/2021/03/16/politicheskoe-uchastie-v-otnosheniya-s-gosudarstvom-v-rossii/](http://www.levada.ru/2021/03/16/politicheskoe-uchastie-v-otnosheniya-s-gosudarstvom-v-rossii/).
- Levada Center (2021b), "Rossiya i Evropa", [www.levada.ru/2021/03/18/rossiya-i-evropa-2/](http://www.levada.ru/2021/03/18/rossiya-i-evropa-2/).
- Melville, A. (2020), "A Neoconservative Consensus in Russia? Main Components, Factors of Stability, Potential of Erosion", *Russian Social Science Review* 61, 3-4: 220–35.
- Miller, A. and F. Lukyanov (2017), "Detachment Instead of Confrontation: Post-European Russia in Search of Self-Sufficiency", *The EuroAtlantic Union Review* 4, 1-2: 53–92.
- Neumann, I. (2016), "Russia's Europe, 1991–2016: Inferiority to Superiority", *International Affairs* 92, 6: 1381–99.
- Pain, E. (2018), "Contemporary Russian Nationalism in the Historical Struggle between 'Official Nationality' and 'Popular Sovereignty'", in P. Kolstø and H. Blakkisrud (eds.), *Russia Before and After Crimea: Nationalism and Identity, 2010–2017* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press): 23–49.
- Pain, E. and S. Prostakov (2014), "Mnogolikii russkii natsionalizm. Ideino-politicheskie raznovidnosti (2010–2014)", *Polis. Politicheskie issledovaniya* 4: 96–113.
- Prina, F. (2016), *National Minorities in Putin's Russia: Diversity and Assimilation* (London: Routledge). Putin, V. (1999), "Rossiya na rubezhe tysyacheletiy", *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 30 December.
- Riabov, O. and T. Riabova (2015), "Gayropa and the Bear: How the Russian Gender Discourse Shapes Contemporary Russians' Attitudes to Europe", in S. Konopacki (ed.), *Europe in the Time of Crisis* (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press): 189–205.
- Rutland, P. (2010), "The Presence of Absence: Ethnicity Policy in Russia", in J. Newton and W. Tompson (eds.), *Institutions, Ideas and Leadership in Russian Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan): 116–36.
- Shevel, O. (2011), "Russian Nation-Building from Yel'tsin to Medvedev: Ethnic, Civic or Purposefully Ambiguous?", *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, 2: 179–202.

Smith, A.D. (1991), *National Identity* (London: Penguin Books).

State Duma (2020), "Novyi tekst Konstitutsii RF s popravkami 2020", <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48953/>.

Suslov, M. (2018), "'Russian World' Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of 'Spheres of Influence'", *Geopolitics* 23, 2: 330–53.

Tishkov, V. (2013), *Rossiiskii narod. Istoriya i smysl natsional'nogo samosoznaniya* (Moscow: Nauka).

Torbakov, I. (2015), "A Parting of Ways? The Kremlin Leadership and Russia's New-Generation Nationalist Thinkers", *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 23, 4: 427–57.

Treisman, D. (2018), "Crimea: Anatomy of a Decision", in D. Treisman (ed.), *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press): 277–98.

Tsygankov, A. (2016), "Crafting the State-Civilization. Vladimir Putin's Turn to Distinct Values", *Problems of Post-Communism* 63, 3: 146–58.

Verkhovskii, A. and E. Pain (2012), "Civilizational Nationalism", *Russian Politics & Law* 50, 5: 52–86.

Verkhovsky, A. (2018), "The Russian Nationalist Movement at Low Ebb", in P. Kolstø and H. Blakkisrud (eds.), *Russia Before and After Crimea: Nationalism and Identity, 2010–2017* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press): 142–62.

Yudina, N. (2020), "The New Exile Strategy of Russian Nationalists", [www.illiberalism.org/the-new-exile-strategy-of-russian-nationalists/](http://www.illiberalism.org/the-new-exile-strategy-of-russian-nationalists/). [448]