Introduction: Russian nationalism is back – but precisely what does that mean?

Pål Kolstø

Nationalism is featuring increasingly in Russian society and in public discourse. Previously dominated by ‘imperial’ tendencies – pride in a large, strong and multi-ethnic state able to project its influence abroad – Russian nationalism is now focusing more and more on ethnic issues. This new ethnonationalism comes in various guises – as racism and xenophobia, but also as a new intellectual movement of ‘national democracy’ that deliberately seeks to emulate conservative West European nationalism.

Western media often fail to grasp the important differences between the various strands of Russian nationalism. Traditionally, Russian nationalists have focused on the perceived need to maintain a large and strong state, and have been far less concerned with ethnic interests and racial purity. These nationalists are usually referred to as ‘statists’ (gosudarstvenniki) or with the more derogatory term ‘imperialists’ (impertsy). Opposed to them are ethnonationalists who fight for the interests not so much of the Russian state but of the Russian people, ethnically defined. These two groups distrust, even hate, each other in their pursuit of opposing political goals.

Achieving ethnic and cultural homogeneity will be impossible as long as Russia remains a huge multi-cultural state with a hegemonic position in the post-Soviet space. A consequence of Vladimir Putin’s drive to maintain a high degree of influence in the Central Asian and Caucasian post-Soviet states has been his willingness to keep Russian borders open to labour migration from these
regions. To be sure, also in the Soviet period there was significant movement of people between the various parts of the USSR, but the setting has now changed radically. Gone is the overarching common Soviet culture; knowledge of the Russian language among the non-Russians in the other post-Soviet states is dwindling; and the immigrants who now arrive in Moscow and other large Russian cities often have little or no education and establish themselves as a poorly integrated Lumpenproletariat. They can travel to Russia without a visa, but working there requires an official permit, which is generally not forthcoming – and so, the vast majority of them work illegally. This labour migration increased after the turn of the millennium: unemployment was rife in the Central Asian and Caucasian states, while the oil-driven Russian economy needed more work hands.

Widespread and growing migrantophobia in the Russian population soon became the main motor behind the nationalist mobilisation. It is no coincidence that the largest Russian nationalist organisation for a long time was the Movement against Illegal Immigration. In mid-December 2010 Moscow became the scene of the biggest riots in recent years, when thousands gathered at Manezhnaia Square to protest against the death of a Russian football supporter killed during a brawl with youth from North Caucasus. Rioters shouted nationalistic and anti-Caucasian slogans; when the mob became rowdy, more than a thousand were arrested (Russia Today 2010). The event marked a sea change in the approach of the Russian regime to the nationalists. Until then, the state authorities had largely condoned radical Russian nationalism, for instance allowing the ‘Russian March’ that gathers thousands of nationalists – including skinheads and neo-Nazis – in the streets of Moscow on 4 November, the official ‘National Unity Day’. This leniency towards nationalists contrasted sharply with the regime’s harsh reactions against the rallies of the pro-Western, liberal opposition, whose meetings were regularly broken up and the participants rounded up by the riot police. The Putin regime had apparently calculated that they could harness nationalist sentiments in the population and exploit them for their own purposes, as with the establishment of the pro-Putin youth movement Nashi, which sought to tap into the
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same nationalist sentiments. However, in about 2009/10, Kremlin strategists seem to have had second thoughts about the wisdom of this strategy.

The disenchantment was mutual: Russia’s nationalists felt that Putin has betrayed them by welcoming immigrant labourers and sending billions of dollars to the majority Muslim North Caucasus (Grove 2011). When the hard-line nationalists were driven out of the Kremlin embrace, some ended up in the anti-Putin opposition. This became clear when huge anti-Putin rallies erupted in Moscow and other Russian cities after the fraudulent parliamentary elections of December 2011, one year almost to the day after the Manezhnaia riots. In these demonstrations pro-Western democrats marched together with vociferous nationalists, waving an incongruous medley of rightist, centrist and leftist banners. The new star of the anti-Putin opposition at the time, blogger Aleksei Navalnyi, was seen as a nationalist with liberal values (Laruelle 2014b; Kolstø 2014). Renowned for characterising the dominant, pro-Putin party United Russia as ‘the party of scoundrels and thieves’, he also endorsed more ominous slogans such as ‘Stop feeding the Caucasus’, and participated in the Russian Marches. Although controversial in some camps, Navalnyi epitomised the increased acceptance of nationalism in many parts of Russian society.

The backdrop to this rise of Russian nationalism was a state that was far more Russian in demographic terms than before 1991. When the Soviet Union broke up, the share of ethnic Russians rose from just above 50 per cent in the USSR, to 81 per cent in the Russian Federation. Observers commented that, for the first time in its history, Russia now had the chance to develop into a ‘nation-state’ based on a high degree of common values and common identity (Tishkov 1997: 246–71). The terms ‘rossiiskii’ and ‘rossiiane’ – non-ethnic words for ‘Russian’ and ‘Russians’ – were introduced to encapsulate this new non-ethnic national idea. Some twenty years later, however, the attempt to establish a rossiiskii nation seems for all practical purposes to have been discarded. The very concept of ‘rossiiane’ is associated with the Eltsin era, and has been ditched along with shock therapy, oligarch economy and other elements of the failed transition to
Western-style pluralism and liberalism. Although the ‘national question’ still simmers beneath the surface in federal politics, the Putin regime has effectively centralised the Federation and emasculated the power of the once-mighty non-Russian elites in the republics.

While Russia became ethnically more homogeneous after 1991, it also experienced a serious demographic crisis. Due to high mortality and low reproduction rates, in addition to substantial out-migration (primarily to the West), the population has been contracting. This has led to a growing demand for guest workers and labour immigration, primarily unskilled or low-skilled workers from the former Soviet republics. In 2011 it was estimated that Russia was housing some four to six million labour migrants – but such figures are highly unreliable, as since as many as two out of three may be illegals not shown in official statistics (Visloguzov 2011). Moreover, the ethno-cultural distance between the new migrants and local populations was increasing: whereas at the turn of the millennium foreign labour migrants were mostly Ukrainians, South Caucasians, Moldovans and Chinese, they were increasingly being replaced by Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. The ethnic element in federal politics had largely been taken off the agenda – but migration, another ethnicity-related issue, loomed increasingly large in public discourse.

In addition to an influx of people from the ‘near abroad’, all major Russian cities also have a population stemming from the ‘inner abroad’ – the string of non-Russian republics north of the Caucasian Range. High fertility rates and low standards of living have induced many people from these tracts to migrate to other parts of Russia. Russian nationalist discourse often does not distinguish between labour (im)migrants from the near and the inner abroad, but lumps them together as one group of ‘aliens’ who allegedly threaten to dilute the (ethnic) Russian character of their neighbourhoods. This is paradoxical, since most Russian cities, including Moscow, are remarkably homogeneous in ethnic terms, indeed more so than most West European metropolises. The 2010 census gave the share of ethnic Russians in Moscow as 91.6 per cent (not including illegal residents), making Russia one of the
very few countries in Europe where the capital is more ethnically homogeneous than the rest of the country.

In any case, ethnic composition as such does not influence the nationality debate directly: what matters is how it is perceived by the population. Research has shown that public assumptions often diverge significantly from demographic data. When Russians are asked to gauge the share of specific non-Russian ethnic groups in the population in their oblast or city, they almost invariably offer exaggerated figures (Alexseev 2010: 171–3). To Russian ‘statists’ and ‘imperialists’, it mattered not so much that the ethnic composition of Russia’s population was heterogeneous as long as the state was large and strong. Historically, if non-Russians were willing to learn Russian and adapt to Russian customs, they were welcome to assimilate into the Russian nation – and historically, millions of non-Russians have done so (Kappeler 1993). Only the Jews were not allowed to assimilate (Kolstø 2009). If in the past the Jews were singled out as the main ‘Other’, xenophobes today – in Russia and elsewhere – more often vent their hatred against the other ‘inner enemy’: Muslim immigrants.

Regime responses

Writing in 2007, Lilia Shevtsova claimed that Russian officialdom not only condoned xenophobic attitudes and expressions, but actively encouraged and tried to exploit them for their own purposes:

Xenophobia has always been endemic in Russia, but it was never allowed public expression. It hid behind imperial ideology. Now ethnic nationalism is often fanned by factions within the ruling elite. In its search for external and internal enemies, the elite focuses on [inter alia] immigrants. (Shevtsova 2007: 283)

If this was correct, the authorities seem, like the sorcerer’s apprentice, to have created a monster they could not control. In about 2010/11, xenophobic nationalism was turning into a weapon that could be wielded against them.

As a part of his 2012 election campaign, Putin in January 2012...
published an article in *Nezavisimaia gazeta* under the heading ‘Russia: the national question’ (Putin 2012b). Here he came across as a nationalist, but of a different kind from those found among the anti-system radicals. Putin denounced nationalism as such – but by presenting his own alternative version of it (Rutland 2012a). His national model differed significantly from the non-ethnic *rossiiskii* model promoted by the Eltsin Administration in the 1990s, by clearly focusing on the historical role – indeed, ‘the mission’ – of the ethnically Russian people. At the same time, Putin’s model retained the state-centred orientation that had characterised Russian nationalism before ‘the ethnic turn’ of recent years.

Then, in the spring of 2014 the scene changed again. In a reaction to the Euromaidan revolution in Kyiv, the Kremlin adopted much more of the rhetoric of the Russian nationalists, in effect stealing their thunder. The annexation of the Crimea was sold to the Russian people in starkly nationalist language. Putin’s popularity, which had been flagging since the beginning of the financial crisis, now soared back to old heights, reaching 85–87 per cent.1 Interestingly, with regard to the two dominant brands of nationalism in Russia – imperial nationalism and ethnonationalism – the annexation of Crimea allowed Putin to ride two horses: since the population of the peninsula is primarily ethnic Russians it was possible to present this act both as an ingathering of Russian lands in a strong Russian state *and* as a defence of ethnic Russians abroad.

The present book traces the vicissitudes of Russian nationalism over the last decade and a half. A grant from the Research Council of Norway allowed us to put together a team of twelve highly competent researchers from six countries, who started working in January 2013.2 Underlying the analysis is a survey carried out in May 2013 by a major Moscow polling institute, Romir, which covered a representative sample of 1,000 respondents nationwide, plus an additional 1,800 respondents in three cities – Moscow, St Petersburg and Krasnodar – 600 respondents in each city. This survey provides a wealth of data on Russian attitudes towards ethno-centrism, xenophobia, patriotism, regime loyalty and other nationalism issues. However, it cannot, of course, tell us anything
about reactions to the 2014 events in Ukraine. An additional grant, however, made possible a follow-up survey, conducted in November that year, to shed light on how Russian attitudes have changed under the impact of the dramatic events that had unfolded since our first survey. The new survey repeated most of the questions from the May 2013 survey verbatim, to enable us to assess how the recent events may have prompted a re-orientation on nationalism issues among the Russian population. We also included some new questions that focused specifically on the Crimean annexation and the war in Eastern Ukraine.

Scope and structure of the book
The book is divided into two main parts: first, society-level Russian nationalism, and, second, nationalism at the level of the state. In Chapter 1 Pål Kolstø (University of Oslo, Norway) pursues three aims: he provides a literature synopsis on the study of Russian nationalism in Western scholarship; offers a brief historical overview over the development of Russian nationalism; and outlines in broad terms the trajectory of Russian nationalism from statist to ethno-centrist positions.

The turn towards ethnification in Russian national identity gained momentum with the collapse of the USSR. The state most Russians now live in – the Russian Federation – is far less multi-cultural than the states they and their forebears had lived in and identified with earlier – under the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union. Today’s ethnification can also be seen as resulting from a ‘contagion’ from the ethnic/nationalist mobilisation of non-Russians under perestroika. Even so, in the first decade after state dissolution, nationalist sentiment in Russia continued to be dominated more by empire-nostalgia than by ethnonationalism.

The new turn towards ethnonationalism came only after the turn of the millennium, spurred by two issues in particular: concern for Russian co-ethnics abroad, ‘stranded’ in the other former Soviet republics when the USSR collapsed; and, somewhat later, the influx of non-Russian migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia into Russian cities. Kolstø concludes that the ethnification of Russian nationalism seems to stem from below, driven by
the new russian nationalism

In Chapter 2 Emil Pain (National Research University – Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia) discusses the persistence of the imperial legacy in the political life in Russia and its influence on Russian nationalism. The enduring combination of nationalism and imperial consciousness in Russia has led to the creation of ‘imperial nationalism’. While this term may seem unfamiliar and even unwarranted from a theoretical point of view, such a phenomenon does exist in Russia and has come to the fore several times, most recently after the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

Pain engages in two theoretical discussions: first, concerning the nature of empire, he proposes a unified theoretical concept of ‘imperial syndrome’ that encompasses several analytical perspectives: its political organisation (the imperial ‘order’), its political ‘body’ (territorial arrangement) and, finally, the type of mass consciousness characteristic of an empire. Second, he discusses the causes behind the endurance of authoritarian and imperial features in Russian politics, first and foremost the mutual relationship between cultural traditions, on the one hand, and the intentional manipulations that lead to this persistence, on the other.

As Pain points out, when the idea of the nation first appeared in Russia under the influence of the French Revolution, it was understood by the Russian elite in the same way as in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Against this background he sets out to explain how it later turned into a very specific idea of imperial nationalism. Pain also analyses the appearance of a new, anti-imperial Russian nationalism after the turn of the last century, and examines its weaknesses after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

In Chapter 3 Alexander Verkhovsky (SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, Moscow, Russia) examines the dynamics of the radical wing in Russian nationalism, from the beginning of Dmitrii Medvedev’s presidency in 2008 to the war in the Donbas region in 2014. Based on extensive research carried out by the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, Verkhovsky’s
analysis focuses on nationalists who oppose the authorities – typically, those who participate in the 4 November ‘Russian March’ – but not on the ‘national democrats’. In the evolution of an aggressive ultra-nationalism promoting a ‘White Power’-influenced model of an ethnically pure Russia in place of the lost empire, 2008 stands as the year in which racist violence peaked. Verkhovsky then considers the radical nationalists’ fluctuating levels of engagement in political activities and in violence, and the dynamics of their relationship with the authorities. He identifies the 2010 Manezhnaia riots as the point at which the federal authorities were forced to elaborate statist nationalism as an alternative to ethnic nationalism. A surprise lapse in this policy came with the anti-migrant campaign of 2013, which significantly inflamed ethnic tensions and generated radical nationalist activity in the form of raids on ‘illegal migrants’.

Notwithstanding this surge in activity, and despite reasonably effective leadership and a range of strategies for generating support (from raids and anti-paedophile campaigns to Kondopoga-type riots), Verkhovsky holds that the movement has been unable to broaden its support base. He ends by briefly summarising ultranationalist responses to the situation in Ukraine, and provisionally concludes that once the Euromaidan anti-authority protest in Kyiv escalated into armed conflict between ‘Russians’ and ‘Ukrainians’, the Russian nationalist movement became divided over whether to support the separatists or oppose them.

In Chapter 4 Anastasia Mitrofanova (Russian Orthodox University, Moscow, Russia) examines the religious attitudes of Russian ethnonationalist circles, whose ideology and political practice centre on the promotion of political self-determination for ethnic Russians, as well as the incompatibility of the teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church with nationalism. She shows that the ‘Russian world’ concept as advocated by the Church is far from promoting ethnic Russian nationalism. Further, the concept is broader than ‘imperial’ nationalism and is currently used to support the universal soteriological ambitions of the Church.

Immediately after the dissolution of the USSR, nearly all nationalists – except a small neopagan anti-Christian minority – identified themselves with Orthodoxy. However, since ethnic
nationalism apparently contradicts the teaching and the policy of the Church, this Orthodox nationalism as promulgated in the early 1990s has now become obsolete. Orthodox nationalists have invented two strategies to allow them to reconcile Christianity with ethnic supremacism: they either join various non-canonical Orthodox jurisdictions, or form non-territorial faith communities around like-minded priests within the mainstream Church.

The neopagans have long been a closed sub-culture in Russia, and support for them now seems to have reached its limits. Instead, it is secularism that has become the most widespread position for contemporary Russian ethnonationalists. Unlike the neopagans, the secularists have nearly unlimited opportunities for recruiting new members; and unlike Orthodox nationalists, they experience none of the ideological challenges or practical difficulties of having to satisfy the regulations of the Church. Secular nationalism has become the most promising stratum within Russian nationalism, where new leaders, new organisations and new ideas are emerging.

In Chapter 5 Natalya Kosmarskaya and Igor Savin (both at Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia) analyse perceptions of immigrants among Muscovites. Throughout the post-Soviet period, the Russian capital has been a magnet for labour migrants from the poverty- and/or war-stricken Caucasus, as well as from parts of Central Asia. In their analysis, Kosmarskaya and Savin draw parallels between the scale and manifestations of anti-migrant sentiments in various countries of Western Europe and among residents of Moscow. The authors examine how the main factors that provoke anti-migrant attitudes in Europe as well as the main concepts used in explaining these attitudes may operate also under the social conditions of the largest city in Russia.

Two features of the Muscovites’ perceptions of labour migrants deserve special attention. First, respondents contextualise the ‘migration issue’ primarily within a wider social setting in Moscow: in their narratives, they associate migrants much more with disturbances of social/political life in Russia/Moscow in general than with any alleged ‘ethno-cultural otherness’. Second, their opinions are marked by a ‘demonstrative xenophobia’. Many of those who
were interviewed through the large-N survey selected questionnaire options that reflected perceptions of migrants as a source of threat to Russian culture, economy and the like. By contrast, those who expressed their opinions through in-depth interviews made it clear that the actual migrants whom Muscovites meet in everyday life in various parts of the city are not perceived through any ‘threat’ lens.

In Chapter 6 Mikhail A. Alexseev (San Diego State University, California, USA) focuses on the repercussions of Putin’s turn to ethnic Russian great-power nationalism at the time of the Crimean annexation in 2014 among Russia’s ethnic minorities, and he asks whether the minorities will support majority ethnic nationalist expansionism. On the one hand, mass opinion surveys in Russia showed overwhelming support for the Crimean annexation across predominantly Russian and ethnic non-Russian regions. On the other hand, interpreting the survey data is difficult, given the government’s control of the media.

Alexseev’s main finding is that ethnic identity is contingent on state identity and prospective valuations of relative group position. Russians and non-Russians were almost equally likely to be proud of their ethnicity and Russian citizenship, to vote for Putin, to believe that Russia’s economy was growing and to support Russian territorial expansion. However, when the non-Russian subsample was further divided into Slavic and non-Slavic respondents, systematic differences emerged as to views on Russia’s state borders. Each group of respondents systematically supported the option under which its own size relative to that of others would increase the most. Thus, support for Russia without the ethnically non-Russian North Caucasus region was strongest among ethnic Russians. Support for a Slavic Union was strongest among non-Russian Slavs. And support for Russia expanding to the size of the former USSR was strongest among non-Slavic respondents.

As noted, the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 took place while all contributors to this volume were engaged in writing up their chapters. This momentous event moved questions of nationalism and national identity to the top of the political agenda in Russia. In order to gauge the changes that were taking place in Russian popular opinion, we carried out a follow-up survey
in November 2014 to our original May 2013 survey. The two polls were analysed and compared by Mikhail A. Alexseev and Henry E. Hale (George Washington University, Washington DC, USA) who present their findings in Chapter 7. They find that attitudes regarding such typically ‘nationalist’ issues as ethnic pride and ethno-centrism had changed very little – possibly because Russians had scored high on these issues already prior to the Crimean annexation. What really changed was support for the regime in general and for President Putin in particular. To a greater extent than before, respondents now expressed the view that Putin was the right man to tackle all kinds of nationalist challenges to the state and in society. Thus, rather than the typical ‘rally-around-the-flag’ effect, Alexseev and Hale find what they call a ‘rally-around-the-leader’ effect.

The chapters in Section II in the book analyse state-level Russian nationalism under Putin. In Chapter 8 Henry E. Hale presents two competing pictures of Russian politics: Some Western researchers depict it as a realm of cynicism, where everything is for sale, leaders rudely dismiss public opinion and politicians mainly pursue their own power and enrichment through a mix of repression and corruption. Others claim that Russia’s leadership is resolutely principled, driven at least in part by the nationalist goal of restoring Russian pride. In Hale’s interpretation these two perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive: they can be explained if we employ the logic of ‘patronal presidentialism’.

‘Patronal presidentialism’ refers to a constitutionally strong presidency that exists in a social context where political collective action unfolds primarily through extensive networks of personal acquaintances, networks that tend to give presidents ‘informal’ power far beyond the authority formally stipulated in the country’s constitution. Even when such presidents use manipulation, coercion and fraud to win elections, they run significant risks of losing power if they lose popular support. For that reason, Russia’s presidents have been highly sensitive to public opinion.

Nationalism comes into play here. The relationship between nationalism and political support in Russia is not straightforward – in fact, Putin did not rely heavily on Russian nationalism for political support during his first two presidential terms or his time
as prime minister. However, a domestic political crisis that came to a head in late 2011, when tens of thousands of demonstrators poured into the streets, changed the Kremlin’s calculus, forcing it to seek out new bases of public support. This eventually led to a far more prominent role for Russian nationalism in connection with Putin’s leadership, and helped to bring about the crisis involving Crimea and Ukraine.

In Chapter 9 Helge Blakkisrud (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Oslo, Norway) shows how the boundary between civic and ethnic has been blurred in Russian nationality policy under Putin’s third term. Traditionally, the Russian – and later Soviet – state relied on an imperial approach to the ‘national question’: on loyalty to the state and the dynasty/Communist Party, rather than to an ethnically defined community. The breakup of the Soviet Union did not immediately change this. After 1991, the multi-ethnic ‘Soviet people’ was replaced by an equally multi-faceted rossiiskii civic identity intended to encompass everyone residing within the borders of the new state.

As the Soviet overlay began to wear off, however, a re-appraisal gradually took place. From around the beginning of Putin’s third term, against a backdrop of internal and external challenges, with the mass protests in Moscow and St Petersburg after the 2011 State Duma elections and the evolving crisis in Ukraine, the Kremlin has undertaken a re-calibrating of its understanding of the national ‘self’. There has been a growing tendency to redefine the citizenry in ethnonational terms. Traditional ethnopolitical correctness has been challenged: the space allocated to the ethnic Russian population within the state project has been expanded. The ethnic Russian (russkii) people together with Russian culture and language have increasingly taken centre stage, with ethnic Russians portrayed as the ‘state-forming nation’ (gosudarstvo-obrazuiushchii narod).

During the first two years of Putin’s third term the civic identity in official rhetoric has become more explicitly Russian, with the Kremlin holding up Russian language, culture and traditional values as the core of this identity. At the same time, Blakkisrud also points out that the Kremlin has distanced itself from more extreme expressions of Russian ethnonationalism.
In Chapter 10 Marlene Laruelle (George Washington University, Washington DC, USA) explores a major ambiguity in Russia’s state discourse about national identity since Putin’s return to power: that of being increasingly anti-Western while at the same time insisting on Russia’s European identity. The Kremlin developed an elaborate narrative dissociating the West’s liberal values from ‘Europe’ as a philosophical and historical principle, and presenting Russia as the representative of authentic European values, the embodiment of those ‘real’ values that have been lost in the West. With the Kremlin’s morality-turn and launching of Russia as the ‘Christian saviour’, Moscow was able to develop close connections with conservative groupings in the West, ranging from the Vatican and some US evangelical movements to family-oriented groups like the highly conservative World Congress of Families, with increasing support among European far-right and classic-right political parties.

This narrative reinforces the traditional idea of seeing Europe – in the sense of a civilisation – as Russia’s main ‘Other’. Laruelle goes on to show how this narrative accords with identity changes experienced by Russian public opinion since the turn of the millennium, especially the rise of xenophobia against migrants and the identification of Russians with Europe. These two trends are echoed even by some of the most radical opponents of Putin’s regime, the ‘national-liberal’ movement, which holds that Russia should follow a European path of development. Seeing nationalism as a European legacy, this movement proclaims the Europeanisation of Russia as its goal.

In Chapter 11 Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz (both at the University of Manchester, UK) explore how Russian state-aligned television presents ethnicity and nationhood in its news broadcasts, considering the effectiveness of the medium as a tool for forging a sense of belonging among the citizens of the largest post-Soviet state. Their material covers the period from 2010 to 2014, with the authors’ reading of it framed by the Ukraine crisis and by the role of Russian federal television in fanning the flames that continue to engulf the actors at its heart.

Neither the conflict with the West that Russia’s actions in Ukraine precipitated, nor the rationale for those actions promoted
in news broadcasts on state-aligned channels, can be understood without reference to tensions within the Putin regime’s nation-building project – tensions that were long evident in television news broadcasts. On the one hand, television news reports present ethnic and cultural diversity as one of Russia’s uniquely positive qualities. On the other hand, with multi-ethnicity and migration proving to be a powder keg within the population at large, and with xenophobia growing, state broadcasters find themselves caught between attempting to preserve ethnic cohesion by under-reporting inflammatory topics, and giving in to popular sentiments by echoing the prejudicial fears to which those topics gave rise. During Putin’s third presidential term, representations of Russia as a multi-ethnic state have been increasingly marginalised by the broadcasters’ promotion of specifically Russian ethno-cultural aspects of identity. Further, ethno-cultural Russian nationalism provided the dominant frame for television coverage of the annexation of the Crimea in March 2014; the ethnic-diversity frame was also utilised, but only occasionally.

In the twelfth and final chapter, Peter Rutland (Wesleyan University, Connecticut, USA) examines an issue often overlooked in discussions of Russian nationalism: the place of economics in Russian national identity debates. On the one side are modernisers who believe that embracing Western market institutions is the only way to restore Russia’s prosperity and hence its standing in the world. On the other side are nationalists who hold that economic integration will erode the political institutions and cultural norms that are central to Russian identity. They argue that erecting barriers to Western economic influence and creating an alternate trading bloc are necessary to prevent the exploitation of the Russian economy and even the possible destruction of the Russian state.

There seems to be no middle position, no third way between the modernisers and the nationalists: a distinctive Russian economic model that could combine elements of trade openness with measures to ensure the country’s long-term development. Putin was building such a model of state corporatism plus international integration in the period 2000–8; but the model revealed its limitations in the stagnation following the 2008 financial crash. He tried to develop an alternative in the form of the Eurasian
Economic Union: a regional trading bloc that would be under Russian control and partially insulated from the global economic institutions dominated by the USA and its allies. However, the change of government in Kyiv signalled that Ukraine was pulling away from economic integration with Russia. The subsequent military confrontation seems to have pushed Russia in the direction of autarky – or perhaps into the arms of China, which would pose new and different risks to national identity.

The dramatic news emanating from Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014 has had a profound influence on popular attitudes among Russians. However, at the time of writing (spring 2015) the civil war in Ukraine is still going on, and as yet we can only speculate about the long-term effects of these momentous events. We can document that they have indeed led to a profound shift in Russian popular discourse and official rhetoric in the direction of a greater focus on various nationalism issues, but we cannot know whether this will lead to a more permanent reconfiguration of the debate. Will the new constellations between ‘imperial’ nationalism and ‘ethnic’ nationalism endure or will the ‘correlation of forces’ between these two currents fall back to the patterns that had crystallised at the beginning of Putin’s third term? It is also too early to determine whether the regime will continue to take the driver’s seat in the promotion of national sentiment in Russia, or whether oppositional nationalists will be able to set the agenda.

The trajectory of Russian nationalism has been affected not only by the country’s relations to the outside world: the changing economic plight of the country is another exogenous factor that has turned the study of this phenomenon into a rapidly moving target. The recent downturn in the Russian economy had been prepared by the failure of Dmitrii Medvedev’s modernisation programme, accelerated by falling oil prices. But it was only after the Western economic sanctions against Putin’s Ukrainian ventures and Russia’s counter-sanctions that Russia experienced a dramatic depreciation of the rouble and negative economic growth. According to media reports, this has already led to a reversal of migration flows into the country: many of the ‘guest workers’ who until recently arrived in droves from Central Asia are already returning home. When construction companies and
other employers are laying people off, the immigrants – who often have no official work permit – will inevitably be the first ones to go. However, these rumours (and for the time being it amounts to no more than that) cannot yet be substantiated by firm statistics, so we cannot know the scope or the permanence of this new trend. It seems clear that to the extent that xenophobia has been fuelled by the sight of an increasing number of alien-looking faces in the streets of major Russian cities, the sudden disappearance of this poorly integrated demographic element is bound to affect the character of Russian nationalism. But how fast and in what direction – that is something we cannot tell.

The re-emergence of nationalism as a strong societal force and public topic in Russia is not unique. In many other European countries, it is precisely the influx of illegal immigrants from other parts of the world that has nourished nationalist sentiments, putting the liberal state under considerable strain. The difference is that Russia today cannot be described as a ‘liberal’ state in the first place. Under conditions of increasing authoritarianism and controlled civil society, it becomes tempting for both regime and opposition in Russia to play the ethnic card so as to tap into xenophobic sentiments in the population. The sudden politicisation of nationalist issues in Kremlin rhetoric after the Euromaidan revolution in order to justify the annexation of Crimea and Russia’s covert military engagement in the Donbas is one recent and ominous example of what this can lead to.

Notes

2. See ‘Nation-building and nationalism in today’s Russia (NEORUSS)’, <www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/research/projects/neoruss> (last accessed 9 March 2015). The project was funded over the Research Council of Norway’s Russia and the High North/Arctic (NORRUSS) programme, project number 220599.
3. From the Freedom of Expression Foundation (Fritt Ord), Oslo.