Blurring the boundary between civic and ethnic: The Kremlin’s new approach to national identity under Putin’s third term

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Traditionally, the Russian – and later Soviet – state has always 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. For a long time, the Romanovs tended to treat all instances of Russian ethnonationalism with considerable scepticism; the very idea of casting the nation in ethnic terms appeared antithetical to their dynastic understanding of the state (Kappeler 2001). And despite their purported ‘ethnophilia’, Soviet nation-builders repeatedly denounced all expressions of ‘Great Russian chauvinism’ (Slezkine 1994). The breakup of the Soviet Union did not immediately change this. After 1991, the multi-ethnic ‘Soviet people’ was replaced by an equally complex and multi-faceted ‘Russian’ (rossiiskii) civic identity intended to encompass everyone residing within the borders of the new state (see, for example, Tolz 2004; Rutland 2010; Shevel 2011). However, as the dust settled and the Soviet overlay started to wear off, a re-appraisal gradually began to take place.

This chapter traces the evolution of President Vladimir Putin’s approach to the Russian national idea and national identity after his 2012 return to the Kremlin – a period during which, 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 undertook a re-calibrating of its understanding of the national ‘self’.
Based on a reading of Putin’s programmatic speeches on national identity, I argue that traditional ethno-political correctness, associated with a civic, multi-ethnic and multi-confessional identity, has been increasingly challenged by a shift in focus towards the traditional ethno-cultural core of this identity: its ‘Russianness’ (*russkost’*). That said, I find that the Kremlin clearly stops short of pursuing clear-cut ethnonationalism. Instead, to maximise its room for manoeuvre, the Kremlin has been deliberately blurring the borders of the Russian ethnic ‘self’, making it possible to re-interpret this ‘self’ as something more narrow but also broader than the body of citizens of the Russian Federation. Internally, such an identity holds the potential to encompass most of the population; externally, it can build up under the Kremlin’s self-appointed role of speaking – and acting – on behalf of not only the ethnic Russians in the Diaspora, but of a wider ‘Russian world’ (*russkii mir*) as well.¹

After a brief backdrop presenting Putin’s take on national identity and the ‘Russian idea’ during his first two terms as Russian president (2000–8), this chapter examines Putin’s key addresses on the national question during the first two years of his third term, culminating with the March 2014 speech on the occasion of the official accession of Crimea and Sevastopol to the Federation. Across these speeches, I argue, Putin redefined the national ‘self’ from a predominantly civic understanding based on citizenship and identification with the state, to a more ethnic one focused on Russian language and culture, one in which the ethnic Russians take centre stage. I then trace how this new understanding of the national ‘self’ was translated into federal policy through the adoption of a new ‘State Strategy on Nationalities Policy for the Period through 2025’, and discuss what response this Russian-centred approach has received in the population at large. The chapter concludes with a discussion of whether Putin’s new ‘ethnic turn’ may have better prospects for taking firm root than the civic rossiane identity the Kremlin sought to promote in the 1990s.
Backdrop: Putin the patriot

The search for a Russian national idea is nothing new; in his 2007 address to the Federal Assembly Putin referred to this as an ‘old tradition, a favourite pastime’ in Russia (Putin 2007a). On the eve of his accession to power, Putin had himself outlined a vision for Russia’s future. In what has been referred to as Putin’s Millennium Manifesto (Sakwa 2008), he had identified three key pillars for a successful Russian resurgence: an effective economy, a strong state and further consolidation of the national idea (rossiiskaia ideia) (Putin 1999). However, during Putin’s first two terms at the helm of Russian politics (2000–8), priority appeared to go to the two first of these pillars, with Russian economy making a remarkable recovery and Putin presiding over the comprehensive re-centralisation of a wide range of sectors within Russian politics and society.

As for the third pillar, the national idea, the Kremlin’s main strategy for nation-building during these eight years seemed to be to sponsor a revival of civic patriotism (see, for example, Sperling 2010). In his Millennium Manifesto, Putin had singled out such patriotism – together with ‘great-powerness’ (derzhavnost’), ‘state-centredness’ (gosudarstvennichestvo) and ‘social solidarity’ – as ‘primordial, traditional Russian (rossiiskie) values’ (Putin 1999). At the onset of Putin’s first term, state patriotism found itself at a historical low ebb; as pointed out in Pål Kolstø’s chapter, during the Eltsin years, the Russian population had struggled to come to terms with the loss of empire and with having to re-align their identity with the new Russian state. Now, after a decade of disintegration and decay, Putin set about instilling a new sense of pride and direction by promoting civic patriotism.

For obvious reasons, the Eltsin administration had had to distance itself from the Soviet past, and focused instead on Russia’s pre-1917 history as the current state’s historical backdrop. With the change in presidency, however, the Kremlin switched to a more pragmatic approach, selectively rehabilitating those aspects of the Soviet experience that were considered positive and conducive to state patriotism – a process illustrated by the decision to adopt the old Soviet hymn with a new set of lyrics as the new
national anthem of the Russian Federation (see Kolstø 2006). The Kremlin thus drew selectively on Soviet as well as imperial Russian history – and by committing to strengthening the economy and the state structures (the first two pillars outlined in the Manifesto), Putin held up the vision of a future in which Russia would again assume its ‘rightful place’ among the world’s great powers.

Putin’s approach to the national idea was in other words state-centred rather than ethnic: the ‘Russian people’ (rossiiskii narod) was understood as a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional union of peoples residing within the borders of the current state. According to Putin, ‘since ancient times, the idea of a shared community (obshchii mir) – shared by people of different nationalities and faiths – has constituted the foundation for the spiritual outlook of the Russian people’ (Putin 2007a). Hence, the Kremlin continued to espouse the civic rossiiane identity that had been introduced by the Eltsin administration (Tishkov 1995; see also introductory chapter). In essence, the Putin regime tried to bolster a patriotic identity along the same lines as its imperial and Soviet predecessors: a civic (non-ethnic) nation model with significant cultural and political rights to non-Russians, held together by a broad set of common values and traditions (Kappeler 2001; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2004).

Although Putin had identified the further evolution of the national idea as key for a successful consolidation of Russian society, he nevertheless spoke against forcing this development. In his Millennium Manifesto, he argued that the national idea would have to evolve in an organic process, through a gradual merger of ‘universal human values and primordial Russian (iskonnye rossi-iskie) values that have withstand the test of time’ (Putin 1999). Aside from adopting some high-profiled programmes aimed at boosting patriotism among the younger generation in particular (see Sperling 2010), the Kremlin did not adopt an especially proactive nation-building strategy at the time.3

In parallel, while officially promoting the concept of civic patriotism, the Kremlin also recognised the potential in tapping Russian ethnonationalist sentiments to feed its vision of a great Russia (the derzhavnost-strand of Putin’s national idea). As a
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Consequence, for most of the first decade of the new millennium, the distinction between what were considered positive expressions of patriotism and what constituted more clear-cut – and negative – nationalism remained blurred (Laruelle 2010b: 22–33). The Kremlin tolerated, and sometimes even actively encouraged, the activities of more moderate nationalist organisations such as Dmitrii Rogozin’s Motherland (Rodina) and the pro-Kremlin youth-movement Nashi (Laruelle 2010b). And although the regime took care not to let Russian ethnonationalists develop into an independent political force (Sakwa 2011a), certain more extreme expressions of nationalist sentiment were nevertheless condoned – like the organising of the ‘Russian March’, an annual event uniting Russian nationalist groups of various stripes, including skinheads and neo-Nazis.

In December 2010, however, this was all to change. When mass riots broke out at the Manezhnaia Square, just a stone’s throw from the Kremlin walls, with several thousands of angry protesters gathering to shout nationalistic and anti-Caucasian slogans, the authorities had to reconsider their hitherto complacent approach toward Russian ethnonationalists. To be sure, these were not the first ethnically motivated riots after the turn of the millennium; the first major incident to hit the headlines had been the violent clashes in the small Karelian city of Kondopoga in August 2006. Here, a brawl that left two ethnic Russians dead developed into what Russian media described as a ‘pogrom’, with an angry mob attacking businesses associated with people hailing from the Caucasus (Shlapentokh 2010). The Manezhnaia riot, however, took the issue to the nation’s capital – and to the top of the political agenda.

Realising that Russian nationalists may draw advantage of widespread latent anti-migrant sentiments in the population at large (see, for example, Malakhov 2014), the Kremlin now decided to clamp down on un-sanctioned expressions of Russian ethnonationalism. The following months saw an increase in the number of court cases against alleged nationalists; in April 2011, for example, one of the key gathering points for the Russian nationalists, the Movement against Illegal Immigration, was banned for espousing extremism. In this way, the Kremlin tried to
force the genie back in the bottle and push the nationalists to the margins of Russian politics.

In a parallel process, United Russia had already for some time been preoccupied with developing its own ‘Russian Project’ (*Russkii proekt*), so as – as put by Andrei Isaev, a member of the United Russia General Council – ‘to destroy the monopoly of extremists and scoundrels to speak on behalf of the Russian (*russkii*) nation’ (quoted in Azar 2007). The ground had therefore already been prepared for a partial reorientation, with the powers-that-be reconsidering its approach to Russian ethnonationalism and trying to appropriate some of the political niche the ethnonationalist had carved out for themselves. Nevertheless, the formulation of a new, comprehensive federal policy on the ‘national question’ would have to wait until Putin’s return to the Kremlin.

**A new take for a new presidency: From marginalisation to partial co-optation**

When Dmitrii Medvedev and Putin in September 2011 announced their decision to swap positions after the March 2012 presidential elections, the outcome of these elections was a foregone conclusion. During the campaign, Putin – true to tradition – refrained from engaging in public debates with his opponents, preferring to communicate with the electorate through a series of thematic newspaper articles. One of these, published in *Nezavisimaia gazeta* in January 2012, was devoted to ‘the national question’. Here Putin took stock of various approaches to how to tackle the multi-ethnic reality of the contemporary state system, lashing out against European-style multi-culturalism, which he claimed had proven to be a failure, as well as against Russian ethnonationalism. The latter he described as ‘a bacillus’ that, if left unchecked, held the potential to destroy Russia. Ethnonationalism had already contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union; according to Putin, Russian nationalism may take the Russian Federation down the same path. He therefore continued to argue the case of patriotism, maintaining that Russia had been shaped by a unique process that had resulted in ‘a multi-ethnic society, but a united people’ (Putin 2012b).
Nonetheless, compared to, for example, the Millennium Manifesto, there was a distinct shift in emphasis: Putin now accorded a much more prominent role to the ethnic Russians, who were held up as ‘the state-forming nation (gosudarstvo-obrazuiushchii narod)’: ‘The core and the binding fabric of this unique civilisation is the [ethnic] Russian people, [ethnic] Russian culture’ (Putin 2012b). Hence, while retaining a traditional state-centred orientation, Putin now signalled an ethnic turn. While categorically rejecting the idea of ‘building a Russian “national”, mono-ethnic state’, an idea that, Putin held, contradicted Russia’s entire thousand-year-old history, he declared Russianness to be the ethno-cultural core of the state-centred identity (ibid.).

This shift must be seen in the context of the mass demonstrations that took place in Moscow and other big cities in the wake of the flawed December 2011 State Duma elections. In addition to being the biggest manifestations of political opposition since the collapse of the Soviet Union, these demonstrations represented a breakthrough for cooperation across ideological divides, with the Western-oriented liberals overcoming some of their traditional distaste for the Russian ethnonationalists (see, for example, Kolstø 2014; Laruelle 2014b). The authorities were clearly taken by surprise by this development as well as the sheer scale of popular mobilisation. In order to regain momentum, Putin’s team therefore decided to grant some (minor) concessions to the demonstrators6 while also co-opting some of their rhetoric. As for the latter, Russian ethnonationalist demands about self-determination and the need for a Russian nation state were reformulated in a way more palatable to the Kremlin: ‘Self-determination for [ethnic] Russians – that is a poly-ethnic civilisation held together by a Russian cultural core . . . The great mission of the [ethnic] Russians is to unite and cement this civilisation’ (Putin 2012b).

The borders of this Russian ‘self’ were kept vague: there was a clearly defined core – Russianness represented the centre of gravity in this ‘poly-ethnic civilisation’ – but at the fringes, non-Russians were welcomed and encouraged to re-align with the majority population. This was an understandable approach. The Kremlin could simply not risk alienating the numerous ethnic minorities residing within the borders of the current Russian
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Federation by pursuing a narrowly defined, exclusivist version of ‘Russianness’. A balance had to be struck between reaching out to the ethnic Russian majority population, without provoking a counter-mobilisation among strong and well-organised minority communities like the Tatars, for example. Putin’s solution was to hold up the possibility of cultural incorporation of these minorities into the broader ‘Russian civilisation’.

From Valdai to Crimea – Narrowing in and widening up?

In his article in Nezavisimaia gazeta, Putin had called for the development of a new federal strategy on how to approach ‘the national question’. Once elected, he set about realising this campaign promise, transforming the lofty ideas into practical policy (see below). On the one hand, Putin emphasised that this new policy should be civic and state-centred – ‘any person living in our country should not forget about his faith and ethnicity. But he should first of all be a citizen of Russia (grazhdanin Rossi) and be proud of it’ (Putin 2012b). On the other hand, he continued to highlight the special role of ethnic Russians within the Russian state project. In his first annual address to the Federal Assembly after returning to the Kremlin, for example, Putin once again stressed the ‘Russianness’ of the Russian people (rossiiskii narod). While acknowledging that Russia comprised a ‘unique, multi-ethnic nation’, he underlined that this nation was held together by ‘the [ethnic] Russians (russkii narod), a Russian language and a Russian culture native to all of us, uniting us, and preventing us from dissolving in this diverse world’ (Putin 2012c).

The current state-formation was built not only on the foundations of the multi-ethnic Soviet predecessor, but on those of Imperial Russia and of Muscovy. In order to revive national consciousness, Putin averred,

we need to link historical eras together and revert to understanding the simple truth that Russia did not begin in 1917, or even in 1991, but rather, that we have a single, uninterrupted history spanning over one thousand years that we rely on to find inner strength and purpose in our national development. (Putin 2012c)
Putin thus explicitly linked the nation-building project with the history of the ethnic Russians and their statehood. He also used the opportunity to denounce again nationalism and chauvinism ‘of various stripes and persuasions’ (Putin 2012c): all manifestations of separatism and nationalism should be removed from the political agenda. This time around, however, the main addressees among putative nationalists were not the Russian ethnonationalists, but the non-Russians:

We must not forget that nationalism and chauvinism do direct and enormous damage especially to the people and the ethnic group whose interests the nationalists are supposedly defending . . . We must regard attempts to provoke ethnic tensions and religious intolerance as a challenge to the unity of the Russian state and as a threat to all of us. We will not allow the emergence of closed ethnic enclaves in Russia with their informal jurisdiction, existing outside the country’s common legal and cultural norms, and disdainfully disregarding the accepted standards, laws and regulations. (Putin 2012c)

In the course of the next year and half, Putin delivered two landmark speeches pertaining to the Russian identity project: in September 2013, a keynote address to the Valdai Club gathering of international Russia specialists; and then in March 2014, a speech to the Federal Assembly and regional heads, outlining the background for welcoming Crimea and Sevastopol as new subjects of the Federation.

The 2013 Valdai Club meeting was devoted to the theme ‘Russia’s diversity for the modern world’– but, instead of praising diversity, Putin’s speech accentuated the fundamental need for developing a unified nation in terms of values and outlook:

In the end, economic growth, prosperity and geopolitical influence all derive from societal conditions; from to what extent citizens of a given country consider themselves a unified nation, to what extent they are anchored in their own history, values and traditions; whether they are united by common goals and responsibilities. In this sense, the question of finding and strengthening national identity really is fundamental for Russia. (Putin 2013a)
In order to consolidate such a national identity, Putin called for a concerted effort involving various strands of society. The first post-independence decade had represented a lost decade: ‘After 1991, there existed an illusion about a new national ideology . . . that would simply appear all by itself’, he declared. However, history had proven that ‘a new national idea does not simply appear, nor does it develop according to market rules’ (Putin 2013a). Putin thus seemed to have abandoned his former stance (as outlined in the Millennium Manifesto) on how to approach this issue: while reiterating that a national idea cannot simply be imposed from above, he now opened up for much more active state involvement in the process.

Mechanically copying other countries’ experiences would be a futile venture, however; the Russian national idea would have to be firmly rooted in history and society. ‘Who are we?’ and ‘Who do we want to be?’ These questions the Russians were asking themselves ‘louder and louder’, Putin declared. The answer, he continued, was to be found in a national identity that was civic in nature, based on ‘shared values, a patriotic consciousness, civic responsibility and solidarity, respect for the law, communion with the fate of the Fatherland without losing touch with ethnic or religious roots’ (Putin 2013a). But at the same time, no doubt should remain about the (ethnic) Russian core of this state-centred identity. The President repeated the now-customary homage to the Russian people, Russian language and Russian culture: but now he also underscored the importance of the Russian Orthodox Church. That was in keeping with the new conservative, values-based approach that had increasingly come to colour the world outlook of the new presidency (Byzov 2014; Sharafutdinova 2014; see also Putin 2013b). Putin’s 2012 state of the nation address had been peppered with references to the importance of history, tradition and family virtues – values Putin associated with his revamped vision of the national community. In the Valdai speech, Putin lashed out against the ‘excessive political correctness’ and multi-culturalism that permeated Western societies, which, he said, led to a rejection of their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. [Many Euro-Atlantic states] are
denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that put same-sex partnerships on a par with large families; belief in Satan on a par with the belief in God. (Putin 2013a)

Up against this decadence, decay and moral upheaval, Putin proclaimed Russia as a beacon of traditional virtues and family values, and called for the people to rally in defence of this values-based national identity. The ‘ethnic turn’ that commenced with Putin’s third term was, in other words, part and parcel of a broader conservative, traditionalist reorientation.

In the March 2014 address devoted to the inclusion of Crimea and Sevastopol as subjects of the Russian Federation, Putin went even further in linking the fate of the ethnic Russians and Russian statehood. As noted elsewhere in this volume, Putin put forward historical arguments to justify the revision of the state borders: Crimea had previously been part of the Russian Empire and then of the RSFSR; and the 1954 decision to transfer the peninsula to Ukraine, a grand gesture by First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the treaty uniting contemporary Eastern Ukraine with Muscovy, was written off as a historical mistake and an unconstitutional act. However, in making his case, Putin consistently used the term russkii rather than rossiiskii. In his emotional appeal, he insisted that ‘in the hearts, in the minds of people, Crimea always was and remains an integral part of Russia . . . Crimea is primordial Russian land (iskonno russkaia zemlia) and Sevastopol a Russian city (russkii gorod)’ (Putin 2014a). In other words, bringing the peninsula back in under Moscow’s control was not only legitimised by Crimea historically having been part of the Russian Empire and the RSFSR – the peninsula was also considered ethnic Russian lands. Accession to the Federation was presented both as an act of rectifying historical injustice and of ethnic self-determination. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian people had ‘turned into one of the biggest divided nations in the world, if not the biggest’ (Putin 2014a). Now, the ethnic Russians – along the local Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars – and the ‘Russian’ lands were being welcomed back home to the motherland.
Putin could not, and probably had no desire to, present Russia as a nation state in ethnic terms, but the language had definitely changed. Gone were the references to an overarching, civic rossiiane identity – in fact, in the key speeches from Putin’s third term examined here not a single time did he apply this term; when he now spoke of the population as a collective, he used the more neutral ‘citizens of Russia’ (grazhdane Rossii). But, as we saw in the Crimea speech, there was also a tendency for rossiiskii to be replaced by russkii, as when Putin spoke of the russkii Black Sea Fleet or of russkii Sevastopol (Putin 2014a).

Putin’s Crimea speech must be interpreted in the wider context of the Ukrainian crisis. When in February 2014 President Viktor Yanukovych had fled Kyiv head over heels, that represented a serious blow to the Kremlin’s image of Moscow as the ultimate power-broker in post-Soviet politics. The subsequent stealth operation paving the way for the ‘reunification’ of Crimea and Sevastopol with the Russian Federation served to restore confidence and spurred unprecedented outbursts of patriotism. Putin’s speech marked the apogee of this.

Still, Putin’s readjustment of national identity, gradually shifting the emphasis toward a more Russian-centred, values-based project, served him well also at this crossroads. Thus far, Putin’s focus on the Russian core of the national identity project had helped in stealing some of the Russian ethnonationalists’ thunder. The Crimea speech demonstrated that an emphasis on ethnocultural Russianness also could yield dividends in Russia’s external relations: a civic rossiiane identity linked to the Russian state could not so easily be mobilised to legitimise expansionist adventures in Ukraine. When identity now was re-cast in ethnocultural terms, however, the Kremlin could appeal not only to the will of the Crimean population as expressed in the recent referendum, but also to the unacceptable separation of ethnic kin. The incorporation of Crimea and Sevastopol into the Federation thus served to rally both Russian ethnonationalists and the impertsy, the adherents of the restoration of a Russian/Soviet Empire (see Emil Pain’s chapter), under Putin’s banner.

While Putin in the Crimea speech came out with stronger support of Russian ethnonational arguments than in any other
major speech discussed here, and this speech has been seen by many as a watershed in Russian identity debate, upping the rhetoric is one thing – practical implementation through adopting policy changes quite another. To what extent was Putin’s rhetorical shift reflected in policy changes in the field of nationalities policy and nation-building over this same period?

From words to policy: Formulating a new approach to Russian nationalities policy

During the election campaign, Putin had signalled a need for updating federal nationalities policy. At the time, Russia’s approach to nation-building and minority politics was still officially guided by the somewhat dated ‘Concept of State Nationalities Policy’ (Kontseptsia…1996). This concept had been adopted in the spring of 1996 when the Russian Federation found itself in the midst of a process of largely uncontrolled, ad hoc decentralisation, and its territorial integrity was threatened by the ongoing war in Chechnya. The orientation of the Concept clearly reflected this. Now, when the trends had turned and Moscow was once again firmly in control, Putin pointed to the need for revising the federal framework for nationalities policy, so that it could better reflect current challenges and needs.

Once back in charge in the Kremlin, Putin wasted no time. On 7 May 2012 – the same day as he was officially inaugurated – he issued a series of decrees outlining the main priorities for his new term (Zav’ialova 2012). One of these decrees, ‘On ensuring interethnic harmony’, addressed the issues of nationalities policy and migration. Here Putin instructed his administration to develop, in cooperation with the federal government, a new strategy for a state nationalities policy by December that year, as well as to establish a presidential consultative council tasked with monitoring the development of inter-ethnic relations (Ukaz Prezidenta RF 2012b).9

A month later, Putin unveiled the mandate and composition of the new Presidential Council on Interethnic Relations. Its fifty seats were filled by top bureaucrats, leaders of various ethnic minority organisations and prominent scholars. According to
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the accompanying statutes, the Council was to convene at least once every six months and facilitate cooperation between federal, regional and municipal authorities and public associations, research institutes and other relevant organisations in addressing issues related to the implementation of state policy on inter-ethnic relations. More urgently, in light of Putin’s call for a new strategy, the Council was also to ‘consider the conceptual basis, goals and objectives’ of this policy (Prezident Rossii 2012).

In October 2012, the Council presented a first draft of the new strategy. Prior to this, some pundits, such as Boris Makarenko at the Centre for Political Technologies, had expressed concerns that the strategy may further extend the ‘bias towards Great Russian chauvinism’ detected in Putin’s election manifesto (quoted in Gorodetskaia 2012a). When the draft was unveiled, however, such fears proved largely unwarranted. Indeed, a noteworthy difference between this draft and Putin’s above-mentioned article was that the ethnic Russians were no longer described as the ‘state-forming people’. This formulation had caused a great deal of controversy, not least in several ethnic republics, and had now been edited out (Gorodetskaia 2012b). Instead, the draft briefly acknowledged the ‘unifying role’ of the ethnic Russians:

Thanks to the unifying role of the Russian people (russkii narod) and centuries of intercultural and interethnic interaction, a unique civilisational community has been formed, the multinational Russian nation (rossiiskaia natsiia), the members of which consider Russia their Motherland. (Proekt . . . 2012)

This re-formulation, which was actually more in line with the original 1996 Concept, was perceived as a nod to the non-Russian part of the population. However, many Russian nationalists were outraged at this decision to downplay the contribution of ethnic Russians to Russian statehood, interpreting this as a yet another proof of the Putin regime’s betrayal of the Russian nation and its right to self-determination. During the hearing process, Vsevolod Chaplin, head of the Orthodox Church’s Synodal Department for Church–Society Relations, warned against the consequences of continuing to neglect the interests of the ethnic Russians as well as
not taking seriously the spread of ‘Russophobia’ within Russian society. ‘To me it is obvious that today, the Russian people (russkii narod) needs systematic support of its culture, language, forms of self-organisation, forms of citizenship [and] community action’ (Chaplin 2012). Dmitrii Demushkin, one of the leaders of the Russian nationalist organisation Russkie, simply dismissed the whole strategy as ‘empty and toothless’ (Natsional’nyi aktsent 2012).

Also representatives of the ethnic minority communities voiced criticism during the public hearing process. Although the state was to guarantee equal rights to all peoples residing in the Russian Federation – the draft had fixed the number of such peoples to 193, and the number of different languages used in the public education system to 89 – and protect the cultural and linguistic diversity these groups represented (Proekt... 2012), formulations about the need for further consolidating Russia’s administrative structure caused considerable concern. In the ethnic autonomies, the latter was interpreted as a thinly veiled attack on their status as independent federal subjects; in terms of population, the autonomies tend to be much smaller than the oblasts and krais, so the leaders of these autonomies feared that the authorities would use the strategy as a pretext for reviving the merger process. After vigorous protests from, inter alia, Tatarstan, overt calls for merging ethnic autonomies with other federal subjects were omitted from the final draft (Litoi 2012; Khisamiev and Coalson 2012).

Finally, the draft strategy was also criticised for ignoring the elephant in the room: the definition of what constitutes Russia’s ‘national idea’. Viacheslav Mikhailov, co-chair of the working group that prepared the draft and former Minister of Nationalities Affairs and Federal Relations (1995–2000), admitted that the authors had been ‘criticised for the fact that we formulate the goal of the state nationalities policy without having formulated a national idea’, but went on to explain that the strategy should be ‘a consensus-oriented document, a form of social contract’ (Gorodetskaia 2012b).

On the whole, the draft provoked considerable debate and reaction. According to one of its authors, Valerii Tishkov, former Minister of Nationalities Affairs (1992) and Director of the
Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, the Council received more than a thousand comments during the hearing process. To avoid inflaming ethnonationalist feelings unnecessarily, the drafters thus sought to have it both ways: to promote both a unifying civic identity as well as individual ethnic affiliation. In the words of Mikhailov, ‘We for the first time introduce the concept of a “Russian civic nation” (rossiiskaia grazhdanskaia natsiiia), but do not desert the ethnic definition’ (quoted in BBC 2012). During the election campaign, Putin could woo Russian ethnonationalist sentiments, but for the nationalities strategy to win widespread acceptance, the powers-that-be would have to find a middle way. The result was a watered-down version in which the Russians were merely the first among equals: in the final version of the strategy, they were fobbed off with a reference to historically having played a key role in the unification of the Russian nation (rossiiskaia natsiiia): ‘The Russian state was formed as a union of peoples with the Russian people (russkii narod) historically playing the system-forming core (sistemoobrazuiushchoe iadro)’ (Strategiia. . . . 2012).

On 19 December 2012, Putin signed a decree approving the new ‘State Strategy on Nationalities Policy for the Period through 2025’ (Ukaz Prezidenta RF 2012c). The media hailed the strategy as the first comprehensive document on nationalities policy in Russia for several decades. With this move, the Kremlin had laid down the general guidelines for political, economic and cultural policies towards Russia’s various ethnic groups for the coming two decades. The text represented less than a clear-cut ‘ethnic turn’, it remained more preoccupied with the civic rossiiskaia natsiiia than the ethnically defined russkii narod, but Putin had given the marching orders, and this was probably in itself more important for providing further direction to the debate on the national identity than the compromise- and consensus-oriented strategy.

Reception among the general population

What about the public reaction? How did the population at large respond to Putin’s ethnonationalist overtures? In recent years,
many ethnic Russians have unquestionably become more vocal in their claims to proprietorship of Russian statehood, demanding to be recognised as representing the ‘state-forming nation’. While ethnic Russians currently constitute a clear majority of the population, their interests have, according to Russian ethnonationalist discourse, repeatedly and consistently been ignored (see, for example, Rogozin 2012).

One frequently used indicator for ethnonationalist sentiments in the Russian population is support for the slogan ‘Russia for Russians’ (Rossiia dlia russkikh). According to the Romir 2013 NEORUSS survey, in spring 2013, almost two-thirds of our respondents (59.3 per cent) supported this slogan, fully or partly. This result may reflect the failure of the Kremlin to take a clear stance against Russian ethnonationalism during much of the first decade of the new millennium, but also that the Soviet overlay has begun to wear thin: while the older generations have been raised on slogans about ‘the friendship of the peoples’ (druzhba narodov) – a slogan that, incidentally, also made it into the new strategy on nationalities policy – research has consistently shown the post-Soviet generation as more prone to espouse xenophobic attitudes (see, for example, Sokolov 2013). In our survey, no single age cohort came out as more supportive of the slogan than those 18 to 24 years old.

When asked who these ‘russkie’ in the slogan ‘Russia for Russians’ were, however, somewhat surprisingly only 39.0 per cent opted for a purely ethnic definition. More than half of the respondents offered a more inclusive interpretation: either that the russkie included all citizens (in other words, indicating a full merger between the rossiiskii and the russkii identity) (24.9 per cent) or ‘predominantly ethnic Russians, but not only them’ (what can be described as an ‘ethnic Russian plus’ approach) (30.0 per cent). Interestingly, the age cohort that most frequently chose the ‘ethnic Russian plus’ option was the post-Soviet generation (18–24 years old). Apparently, a majority of the respondents are ready to support Putin’s Russo-centric but non-ethnic interpretation of the national self.

Who are potentially included, and who are defined out of this russkii in-group? In the survey, we did not ask explicitly
about what other ethnic groups the respondents were willing to subsume under the category *russkii*. Elsewhere, however, Emil Pain has discussed such an expanded self in the context of ‘us’ versus ‘the migrants’. He finds that among internal migrants, representatives of ethnic groups from the North Caucasus stand out as a culturally alien group that the majority population find hard to include in the wider ‘self’. According to Pain, ‘In Moscow no one calls someone hailing from St Petersburg, Tyumen or Oryol a “migrant”, the same goes for Tatars or Bashkirs originating in their respective republics’; in fact, even people hailing from Ukraine and Belarus may escape this epithet (quoted in Filina 2013). Instead, the term ‘migrant’, a code-word for ‘the Other’, is reserved mainly for people arriving from the Caucasus and Central Asia. In other words, even though the North Caucasus has been part of the Russian/Soviet state for more than 150 years, the majority population still finds it hard to include ethnic groups hailing from this region in the national ‘self’; the cultural and religious characteristics of these ethnic groups are perceived as difficult to align with the *russkii* ‘self’.

In his 2012 speech to the Federal Assembly, Putin recalled how a World War II veteran who was not a Russian by ethnicity once had told him: ‘As far as the entire world is concerned, we are one people, we are Russian (*russkie*).’ Putin added, ‘That was true during the war, and it has always been true’ (Putin 2012c). Although there exist cultural barriers that most probably will prevent certain ethnic minorities from being absorbed into a greater *russkii* community, the Romir 2013 NEORUSS survey indicates that the ethnic Russian population is ready to accept minorities as part of a national *russkii* self.

**Concluding discussion**

While Putin has characterised the Russian search for a national idea as ‘an old tradition, a favourite pastime’, he has also made it clear that national identity is a work in progress (see, for example, Putin 2013a). The current ‘ethnic turn’ with a ‘Russification’ of the national idea is probably best understood as a delayed reaction. While the other fourteen former union republics immediately set
about engaging in nation-building processes in which they positioned themselves against the old Soviet superstructure, it took time before Moscow began to come to terms with the new realities. The rossiiane identity could be seen as a stopgap measure: a slightly modified version of the Soviet civic identity readjusted to a greatly reduced territory. As time went by, however, the new demographic and political circumstances called for a revision of the initial post-Soviet identity project.\(^{17}\)

The Kremlin’s response during Putin’s third term has been to deliberately blur the boundaries between the civic rossiiskii and the ethnic russkii identities. The civic identity has become more explicitly Russian, with the Kremlin holding up the Russian language, culture and traditional values as the core of this identity. At the same time, Putin has distanced himself from more radical expressions of Russian ethnonationalism. Adherence to culture and values is seen as more important than ancestry and genes when it comes to defining who is in and who is out. The boundaries of the russkii identity are opened up so as to include members of other ethnic groups that subscribe to the values-based identity now promoted by the Kremlin.

To what extent does this project stand a better chance of winning widespread acceptance among the general population than the rossiiane project of the early 1990s? Several factors complicate a more universal acceptance of a russkii-centred identity.

First of all, an obvious obstacle is the way the state itself continues to be organised. When the Soviet Union broke apart, the new rulers in the Kremlin opted for preserving the Soviet ethno-federal structure more or less intact. This meant that thirty-two of the altogether eighty-nine constituent entities of the Russian Federation were defined as ethnic autonomies – as ethnic homelands of one or more titular groups. After the turn of the millennium, the Kremlin engaged in a campaign to rationalise the federal structure, singling out some of the scarcely populated autonomous okrugs for abrogation. During Putin’s second presidential term, six okrugs were merged with neighbouring oblasts or krais. Due to strong local resistance in some republics, however, that campaign was soon shelved. By the time of the accession of
Crimea and Sevastopol, the Federation thus still consisted of no less than twenty-six autonomies.\textsuperscript{18}

The debate on the federal structure is not dead in Russia. As the Crimean euphoria began to subside, and the harsh realities of a faltering economy began to sink in, some actors began to dust off old plans for re-centralisation and de-federalisation. Former Prime Minister Evgenii Primakov, for one, argued that autonomies where ethnic Russians form a majority ought to be abolished and merged with ‘regular’ subjects (Primakov 2015). Still, even if such plans should come to fruition, no serious politician would at this stage dare to question the future of republics like Tatarstan or Bashkortostan. A switch to a fully unitary state structure is currently not an option. And as long as such republics continue to form constituent parts of the Federation, these ethnic homelands will continue to serve as a constant reminder to their titular populations about their ‘non-Russianness’. An ethno-federal state structure may pair well with the old rossiiane identity, but is harder to reconcile with a more Russian-centred identity project.

Second, the new identity project is not starting with a clean slate. To the contrary: for seventy years, Soviet citizens were taught that ethnic affiliation mattered. In the 1920s, during korenizatsiia, Soviet authorities undertook an unprecedented project of ethnic engineering – of consolidating and indeed also inventing ethnic identities (Slezkine 1994). Not only did the Soviet authorities sponsor minority-language education, media and cultural institutions, they also intervened on the individual level, requiring all citizens to have their ethnic affiliation written into their internal passports, the standard ID document. This affiliation was not based on self-ascription, but on the ethnicity of the bearer’s parents. No-one was allowed to escape his or her ethnic roots. At the same time, ethnicity opened doors, with jobs and privileges being accorded in line with ethnic affiliation and quotas: the Soviet Union has been described as an ‘affirmative action empire’ (Martin 2001). This heritage has left a deep imprint also on post-Soviet generations. Especially when such ethnic identities are combined with – and reinforced by – ethno-federal political and administrative structures, they may be quite well-positioned to withstand assimilatory pressures.
Finally, although the Soviet ethno-political overlay is wearing thinner over time, Soviet discourse and practices continue to have an influence on Russian society. According to the Soviet self-understanding, the ‘nationality question’ had been resolved. Officially, there were no ethnic conflicts; the multi-national Soviet people lived peacefully together in the spirit of the slogan of ‘friendship of the peoples’ (*druzhba narodov*). Even though the breakup of the Soviet Union had been fuelled by ethnonationalist mobilisation and the new Russian Federation had subsequently gone through two gruelling wars against Chechen separatists, we have seen that Putin has continued to insist on describing the nation as a ‘multi-ethnic’ or ‘poly-ethnic’ civilisation (see, for example, Putin 2012b, 2012c). The reluctance to acknowledge the ethnic Russians as the ‘state-forming nation’, as well as the fact that the old Soviet slogan about the ‘friendship of the peoples’ found its way into the final version of the new State Strategy on Nationalities Policy, further testify to the resilience of traditional Soviet political correctness.

On the other hand, there are also several factors that would seem to support such a new identity project. First, despite the official rhetoric about Russia being a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state, the vast majority of the population considers itself to be *russkii*. In the latest census (2010), no less than 80.9 per cent of the population identified itself as ethnic Russians (Federal’naia sluzhba . . . n.d.), a higher share than in several putative ‘nation states’. Greater emphasis on the Russian core can therefore be expected to resonate well with the bulk of the population.

Second, while the Russian Federation takes pride in encompassing the traditional homelands of a large number of ethnic groups, and in many cases also seeks to uphold these in the form of autonomies, most of the ethnic minority groups are quite small in numerical terms. While the new State Strategy on Nationalities Policy establishes that Russia is the home to 193 different ethnic groups, as of today, only five minority groups constitute more than 1 per cent of the total population (the Tatars, with 3.9 per cent; Ukrainians, with 1.4; Bashkirs, with 1.1; Chuvash with 1.1; and Chechens, with 1.0) (Federal’naia sluzhba . . . n.d.). In terms
of absolute figures, there are only seventeen groups that count more than half a million members. Many others find themselves at the brink of extinction. While the Kremlin clearly wishes to avoid spurring counter-mobilisation among the minorities, minority nationalism thus serves only as a soft constraint on the ‘ethnic turn’.

Moreover, while Soviet policy served to prevent formal assimilation – even if a person became linguistically or culturally Russified, he or she could not legally change ‘passport nationality’ – political liberalisation in the 1990s lowered the bar for re-identification. When the Eltsin Administration decided that the state was no longer to interfere in the ethnic self-identification of individual citizens and abolished the Soviet practice of specifying ethnic affiliation in the internal passport, this was conceived as an anti-discriminatory measure (Simonsen 2005). However, the ‘passport nationality’ had also functioned as a barrier against potential defection: as a constant – and unescapable – reminder about each individual’s ethnic origins. Now it became much easier to sever the bonds that still tied linguistically and culturally Russified individuals to their minority origins. This opened up for reinforcing the ethnic core with an influx of Russified minorities – something that, with the onset of the ‘ethnic turn’, served the Putin administration well.

Finally, one could also question how profoundly different Putin’s new identity project is in terms of actual content. While the rossiane identity was certainly more inclusive in that it automatically incorporated all citizens into the national ‘self’, the cultural core of this civic identity has always been Russian or ‘Russian plus’. The Russian language has been the state language. The history taught in state schools is that of the Russian state, from ancient Kievan Rus via Muscovy and Imperial Russia to the present Russian Federation. And Russian culture – with all its multi-ethnic contributors – has provided the civic identity with a cultural depth. Arguably, then, the shift in emphasis from rossiiskii to russkii did not really challenge the core of the old identity project.

At the same time, the new project’s more explicit reference to – and reliance on – the ethnic Russian core may make this
a more robust identity than the old rossiiane one. Instead of  
postulating a community based on state borders, the Kremlin  
now narrows down the national identity to something imme-  
diately recognisable for the majority of the population – while  
also keeping the borders of the in-group sufficiently blurred  
to be able to welcome much of the rest of the population into  
an expanded self. When Putin in his election platform spoke  
of ‘Russian Tatars’ and ‘Russian Germans’, using the epithet  
russkie and not rossiiske (Putin 2012b), this indicates the inclu-  
sive, even potentially expansionist, nature of the new project.  
Some non-Russians may be ‘ethnic’ in form, but can be accepted  
as ‘Russian’ in content.

On the whole, as stressed in Mikhail Alexseev’s contribution  
to this volume, Russia’s national identity is far more dynamic  
than its Western counterparts; more than two decades after the  
breakup of the Soviet Union, it is still very much in the making.  
And as shown here, the Kremlin is unwilling to define this iden-  
tity further: it is ethno-culturally Russian at the core, but it is also  
multi-ethnic and multi-confessional. The ethnic Russians may be  
held up as the ‘state-forming’ nation – and yet, Putin categorically  
refuses to redefine the Russian Federation as a Russian nation  
state.

This is undoubtedly a deliberate ambiguity and a calculated  
blurring of borders. According to the Kremlin, the russkii identity  
should not be constrained by state borders; it represents a sepa-  
rate, unique civilisation (russkii mir). The new take on national  
identity thus not only contributes to rallying considerable support  
for the regime within the Russian Federation, it also opens up for  
reaching out to the Russian and Russified diaspora in the neigh-  
bouring states. The lack of a clear definition has sometimes been  
seen as a challenge to successful nation-building in Russia (see, for  
example, Shevel 2011) – but it also has the advantage of leaving  
the Kremlin with maximum room for manoeuvre.

Notes

1. The russkii mir refers to a supranational community bonded by  
   Russian culture, the Russian language and the Orthodox faith, a
community extending far beyond the borders of the present Russian state (see, for example, Saari 2014: 60–1; Laruelle 2015b).

2. The challenges involved in coming up with a new, unifying identity that matched the changed geopolitical realities can be seen in the failure of Eltsin’s 1996 competition for a ‘new national idea’.


4. Some observers argue that the shift in the Kremlin’s approach pre-dated the Manezhnaia riot. According to Alexander Verkhovsky, for example, the re-evaluation of the usefulness of ‘controllable’, moderate nationalism took place already in 2009, following a dramatic rise in hate crime: ‘Since then the only policy is suppression’, Verkhovsky argues (quoted in Grove 2011).

5. Putin’s open dismissal of multi-culturalism was in no way unique in a European context; here he was following in the footsteps of several prominent Western leaders. Already in 2010, President Nicholas Sarkozy of France went on record declaring that multi-culturalism was dead. Sarkozy was later echoed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who averred that the ‘Multikulti’ approach had ‘failed utterly’, and also by British Prime Minister David Cameron (Marquand 2011; see also Koopmans 2013). While these leaders, like Putin, seemed to rally round a national Leitkultur, Putin differed in that he dismissed Western-style multi-culturalism, while insisting that the Russian state identity was a successful example of the forging of a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional identity.

6. Before stepping down as president, Medvedev agreed to re-introduce gubernatorial elections, to simplify the procedure for registering parties, as well as to lower the threshold for running as an independent candidate in presidential campaigns (Medvedev 2011).

7. On 16 March, in a highly controversial referendum – and in the presence of Russian soldiers – the population of Crimea and Sevastopol had voted overwhelmingly in support of unification with Russia (according to the official results, unification was supported by 96.8 per cent of the voters in Crimea and 95.6 per cent in Sevastopol).

8. However, the protracted conflict in Eastern Ukraine has been extremely counterproductive for winning support for the new identity project beyond Russia’s border. Up to now, the border between
Russian and Ukrainian identities has been exceptionally fuzzy (as regards language, for example, expressed through Surzhyk, a non-standardised mix of Russian and Ukrainian spoken in large tracts of Ukraine, especially in the East). As a consequence of the war, however, people have increasingly sided with Ukrainian identity and Ukrainian statehood (see, for example, Feifer 2014). The conflict may thus have deprived the Russian identity project of one of its most promising catchment areas.

9. In addition, the decree ordered the introduction of a compulsory exam for foreign workers in Russian language and history as well as the basics of Russian legislation. Only highly qualified specialists were to be exempt from this requirement.


11. The 1996 Concept of State Nationalities Policy described the role of ethnic Russians in the state-building project in the following way: ‘Thanks to the unifying role of the Russian people (russkii narod), a unique unity and diversity, spiritual communality and a union of different peoples have been preserved on the territory of Russia’ (Kontseptsia . . . 1996).

12. Author’s interview, Moscow, 16 June 2014.

13. In August 2013, the Strategy was followed up by the adoption of a federal targeted programme ‘On strengthening the unity of the Russian nation (rossiiskaia natsiia) and the ethno-cultural development of the peoples of the Russian Federation’ for the period 2014–20 (Federal’naia . . . 2013). The programme specified how authorities at all levels should work together with civil society, the education system and mass media – through the Internet, social advertising and the staging of mass events – to strengthen an ‘all-Russian civil identity’ and ‘civil patriotism’. The authorities set as a target that by 2020, 65 per cent of the population should assess the state of interethnic relations in the Federation positively (Gorodetskaia 2013).

14. Support for this slogan seems remarkably stable over time. The Levada Centre routinely asks about how their respondents relate to the slogan. In July 2002, 17 per cent fully supported the slogan and an additional 38 per cent held that within reasonable limits, it would be good to realise such a project; in July 2014 the corresponding figures were 18 per cent and 36 per cent (Levada Centre 2014f).
15. According to the State Strategy on Nationalities Policy, the state is responsible for ‘ensuring the conservation and enhancement of the spiritual and cultural potential of the multi-ethnic people of the Russian Federation on the basis of the ideas about unity and friendship of the peoples, interethnic consensus and Russian (rossiiskii) patriotism’ (Strategia . . . 2012).

16. The average score for this cohort was a full ten percentage points higher than that of the oldest cohort, the 60+.

17. As pointed out in several other contributions to this volume, increased labour migration also played an important part. The combination of the need to import workers – Russia is estimated to be second only to the USA in the number of immigrants (United Nations 2013) – and a weakened identification with the sending countries and their cultures accentuated the perceived need for redefining the national ‘self’.

18. Despite its overwhelmingly ethnic Russian population and Putin’s assertion that Crimea was ‘Russian land’ (russkaiia zemlia) (Putin 2014a), Crimea joined the group of ethnic autonomies, being granted the status as a republic within the Federation, whereas Sevastopol became a ‘city of federal importance’ (the same status as the two ‘capitals’, Moscow and St Petersburg).

19. Four of these are groups with external homelands: the Ukrainians, Armenians, Kazakhs and Belorussians.

20. This danger of accelerated re-identification was recognised by the leaders of several of Russia’s ethnically defined republics, who insisted on maintaining information about ethnic affiliation in the internal passports. In the end, the republics won the right to include an insert containing information about ethnic affiliation in the passports issued on their territory (see, for example, Simonsen 2005).

21. According to Oxana Shevel (2011: 183) it has always been open to interpretation how Russo-centric the rossiiskii nation is.