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STATE-LED NATIONALISM IN TODAY'S RUSSIA

UNITING THE PEOPLE WITH CONSERVATIVE VALUES?



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY	4
1. INTRODUCTION	5
2. HOW TO APPROACH RUSSIAN STATE-LED NATIONALISM? CONCEPTS AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY	6
3. THE IDEOLOGICAL CONTEXT IN TODAY'S RUSSIA: THE CONSERVATIVE TURN	9
4. MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY: LANGUAGE MATTERS	11
5. THE MAIN NARRATIVES OF THE RUSSIAN NATION	13
5.1 The narrative of the united nation: "nation as us"	13
5.2 The narrative of the "victorious nation"	16
5.3 The narrative of a multinational nation: a "multinational genetic code"	19
5.4 The narrative of the moral nation: shared traditional values	22
CONCLUSIONS: NATIONALISM OF THE MORAL MAJORITY	28
REFERENCES	30

SUMMARY

In recent years, the Russian state has been described as becoming “more nationalistic”. In the time period encompassing the Sochi Winter Olympics, the occupation of Crimea, the war in Donbas that continues to this day, air strikes in Syria, and the state seeking new legitimacy during the deepening economic crisis in Russia, many notions have been connected to growing nationalism.

But nationalism as such is an ambiguous concept. Moreover, there is hardly any state in today’s global system that could be said to be totally devoid of nationalistic argumentation. Therefore, the way in which the Russian state leadership is using nationalism in order to achieve its political goals requires a critical empirical study. Authoritarianism, conservatism, and even imperialism have been discussed as “new” features of the Russian state. But the change in the self-understanding of the Russian state is not a result of one factor, such as strengthening national pride, but rather a wide range of ideas that have been reshuffled in relation to each other. This Working Paper focuses on the state-led nationalism in this changing ideational environment between the years 2012 and 2016, and how it has been received by the people.

To this end, the Working Paper will argue that the ethnic-civic dimensions are insufficient in themselves to explain the nature of the contemporary state-led nationalism in Russia, as the official discourse both blurs these boundaries and creates new ones. President Vladimir Putin’s language simultaneously seeks acceptance by the majority of the people and control over embodiments of ethnic nationalisms. Hence, the state-led nationalism today leans on the narratives of a nation that has a history of a multinational country where ethnic Russians are still “first among equals”.

For a long time, the Russian state has been shaping nationalism by portraying an image of a united nation, held together by commonly shared culture, history, language and values. These common denominators have remained the same, but the emphasis has varied. Today, the cultural unity of Russians extends beyond the state’s geographical and political borders, and the shared values are defined from above in a more restricted manner. The official discourse aims at distinguishing the Russian nation from other nations, but also at framing the right ways to be Russian: morals and patriotism are prerequisites for belonging to the nation. The conclusion of this paper is that despite being ethnically inclusive at the level of discourse, the contemporary Russian nationalism produced by the state leadership is exclusive in its demand for conservative, traditional values.

1. INTRODUCTION

The comprehensive change that has taken place in Russian foreign and domestic policy during the past two years has been widely explained as stemming from growing nationalism. But as nationalism is a highly ambiguous concept, commentaries such as this require further elaboration. Moreover, even though there is hardly any state in today's global system that could be said to be totally devoid of nationalistic argumentation in politics, it is very common to see nationalism elsewhere than in one's own context – it is often a phenomenon observed from a distance and criticized.

For these reasons, the statement that Russia or its political leadership has now become more nationalistic lacks any explanatory power as such. Authoritarianism, conservatism, and even imperialism have been discussed as “new” features of the Russian state. But the change in the self-understanding of the Russian state is not a result of one factor, such as strengthening national pride, but rather of a wide range of ideas that have been reshuffled in relation to each other. The paper at hand analyses nationalism in this changing environment by focusing on the narratives about the nation embedded in the official Russian discourse between the years 2012 and 2016.

2. HOW TO APPROACH RUSSIAN STATE-LED NATIONALISM? CONCEPTS AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY

In this FIIA Working Paper,¹ the contemporary Russian state-led nationalism is contextualized by analyzing the discourse of the current leadership during the past few years. An important theoretical assumption of the study is that nationalism is constructed,² and to a large extent this process takes place in the language.³ In this paper, it is the issue of agency and the motivations behind the constructing of nationalism that are in focus: who is aiming to “invent the nation”, to use Eric Hobsbawm’s term, and why? In Russia – albeit not in Russia alone, as mentioned above – the political leadership of the country is using nationalistic argumentation in order to achieve its political goals. In this way, the official discourse provides evidence on how the state leadership is aiming at achieving and maintaining the lead in the process of “inventing the nation”.⁴ Hence, it is far from irrelevant how the political leaders frame their message in time and space: which concepts they use, and how they motivate certain decisions.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many aspects of the Russian national identity have remained at the core of this construction. On the one hand, there has been a widely shared experience among the people of losing their national identity together with their home country, while on the other hand, the strong will of the political leadership is seeking ways to enhance the attachment of the people to the state. As Daucé et al. point out, “[i]n authoritarian contexts, patriotism undoubtedly has a political dimension different from in democratic contexts, but it does not limit itself to be a purely top-down dynamic”.⁵ Or, as Jardar Østbø puts it, those aiming at “inventing the nation” need to choose symbols, memories, and traditions (or narratives, I would add) that “strike a

1 The author would like to thank her colleagues at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Dr András Rácz and Dr Marco Siddi, as well as Dr Jussi Lassila from the University of Helsinki for their invaluable help and comments.

2 Hobsbawm, Eric & Ranger, Terence: *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.

3 Ball, Terence. *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

4 This is the main reason why I have chosen to use the term “state-led nationalism”.

5 Daucé, Françoise – Laruelle, Marlene – Le Huérou, Anne & Rousselet, Kathy: “Introduction: What Does it Mean to be a Patriot?” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 67, No. 1, 2015, 3. Daucé et al. write about “Kremlin-backed patriotism”, and while agreeing with their analysis, I have chosen to use the term nationalism (or state-led nationalism, as explained above) in this study. In addition, it needs to be explicitly noted that when studying Russian nationalism (*natsionalizm*), the term itself has a very negative connotation in everyday speech. I have, however, chosen not to use the word patriotism because the scholarly literature has been using nationalism as a concept of theory formation.

chord” in the population.⁶ Nationalism is thus understood in this study as a process that is not entirely produced by the state leadership but rather shaped by it according to its political aims in time. The key research question in this study is thus: How does the state leadership shape the contemporary Russian nationalism? This question, even when properly answered, naturally leads to the next one: How is it received among the greater public? Is state-led nationalism genuinely embraced by the people? The reception of the message also says something about the potential success of “shaping nationalism” as a strategy for reaching political goals. From the point of view of methodology, the latter question here is much more difficult to answer. In this study, the official discourse of nationalism is mirrored by the information produced by opinion polls conducted regularly in Russia and by a set of semi-structured interviews. The interviews were held with young Russian professionals working mainly in the field of politics and civil society, representing various views and standpoints vis-à-vis the establishment.⁷ The interviewee sample is small and selected, but is still thought to deepen the information provided by the opinion polls.

While acknowledging that “[n]ation, nationality, nationalism – all have proven notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse”,⁸ a definition of nationalism is still needed in this case. To this end, I turn to John Breuilly’s explanation that nationalism means “political movements seeking or exercising state power and justifying such action with nationalist arguments” – where the nationalist argument, for its part, rests upon three assumptions: that there exists a nation with an explicit character; that the interests of this nation take priority over other nations; and that the nation must be as independent as possible.⁹ This definition opens up a number of possibilities for explaining the *nation* – inasmuch as the nation’s “explicit character” might rest upon various factors, and where ethnicity, for example, need not be the decisive one. That said, defining the nation is an additional element of the research question in this study.

Sometimes ethnic and civic nationalism¹⁰ are presented as primary distinctive categories. The division is by no means unproblematic, not least because it tends to be ideologically loaded in presenting civic variants of nationalisms as “good”, legitimate ones and ethnic

6 Østbø, Jardar: *The New Third Rome: Readings of a Russian Nationalist Myth*. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag 2016, 22.

7 During April and May 2016, a total of 12 interviews were conducted. The youth organisations of all the main political parties (represented in the Duma and outside of it) were contacted, as well as some visible youth organizations representing religious, nationalist or liberal values. See the list of interviewees in the references.

8 Anderson 1983, 3.

9 Özkırımlı, Umut. *Theories of Nationalism. A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000/2010, 84.

10 The terms refer to alternative ways of understanding the nation: ethnic nationalism perceives the nation as an entity sharing an ethnic background (in an exclusive manner), whereas civic nationalism sees the nation as a political or cultural entity, a nation of citizens (and inclusive in relation to ethnicities). See e.g. Brubaker, Rogers: *Etnisyys ilman ryhmiä*. Tampere: Vastapaino, 2013, 198–200.

variants as the illegitimate ones.¹¹ In the Russian case, the state-led nationalism is neither solely ethnic, nor solely civic in nature. While being an ethnically heterogeneous country with over 190 nationalities, the majority (78%) of the population are still ethnic Russians.¹² The Constitution of the Russian Federation guarantees the multiethnic status of the country, but at the same time the idea of Russian ethnicity as “first among equals” is strong and has been reinforced both by representatives of the establishment¹³ and influential media actors.¹⁴

Contemporary Russian nationalism cannot be seen as civic in the sense that it would stress individual rights or the democratic participation of the citizen.¹⁵ In recent years in Russia, individual civil rights have become overridden by state interests. The discussion on ethnic and civic nationalisms in the previous research literature has shown that this categorization rarely captures all the significant features of any version of nationalism, and therefore in this paper other possible dimensions of nationalism – or combinations thereof – are explored.

11 Brubaker 2013, 199–200; Özkırımlı 2000/2010, 37.

12 Vserossiyskaya perepis naseleniya 2010. Federalnaya sluzhba gosudarstvennoy statistiki (GKS), http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm, last accessed 17.10.2016.

13 Zakharov, Nikolay. *Race and Racism in Russia*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 123; Blakkisrud, Helge: “Blurring the boundary between civic and ethnic: The Kremlin’s new approach to national identity under Putin’s third term.” In *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*, edited by Kolstø, Pål & Blakkisrud, Helge. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2016, 254–255.

14 Hutchings, Stephen & Tolz, Vera: *Nation, Ethnicity and Race on Russian Television: Mediating Post-Soviet Difference*. Oxon: Routledge, 2015, 223.

15 See e.g. Rutland, Peter: “The Presence of Absence: Ethnicity Policy in Russia.” In *Institutions, Ideas and Leadership in Russian Politics*, edited by Julian Newton and William Thompson, 116–36. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 122–124.

3. THE IDEOLOGICAL CONTEXT IN TODAY'S RUSSIA: THE CONSERVATIVE TURN

A broad definition of nationalism makes it possible to evaluate the phenomenon within a frame of political rhetoric and, as stated above, it also offers more tools for analysis than merely tracing “good or bad” features of the phenomenon. At the same time, it needs to be borne in mind that nationalism is a very peculiar political idea and should not necessarily be approached as a distinctive ideology. According to Michael Freeden, nationalism usually exists within an established ideology. Some core concepts are constant – such as the idea of a group as an identifying and constituting framework for people, and positive valorisation of one’s own such group – but the emphasis varies according to the ideology within which nationalism develops.¹⁶

Maria Engström has labelled the recent change in the Russian political atmosphere as the “re-ideologisation” of domestic, foreign and security policy.¹⁷ The change became evident at the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s third presidential term in 2012, which marked a clear break with the previous four years under the rule of Dmitri Medvedev (or the so-called tandem governance exercised by him and the then prime minister Putin). Although limiting media freedom and opposition activities had been part of the state repertoire even before that, the massive street protests during winter and spring 2011–2012 against fraudulent elections made the leadership even less tolerant towards political contention.

Today, Russia is turning inwards both economically and ideologically. In order to legitimize this direction, the political leadership of the country has instrumentalized conservative values. Conservatism, as Elena Chebankova writes, is based on a worldview that sees danger as a natural state of things, and therefore tries to cope with the constant experience of threat.¹⁸ Globalization and changing values that contradict the traditional ones have been presented as threatening Russia for a longer period of time, but the narrative of an aggressive and active West that aims at expansion has become one of the key threats in recent years.¹⁹ Similarly, the narrative of Russia as a “besieged fortress”²⁰

16 Freeden, Michael: *Liberal Languages. Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005, 207.

17 Engström, Maria: “Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy.” *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 3, 2014: 356.

18 Chebankova, Elena: “Contemporary Russian Conservatism.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 2015(a): 6; See also Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz on the subject of Russian television: “Today, portrayals of the country as following a straight path leading to a bright future have been superseded by depictions of a society in deep crisis, faced with multiple and ever growing external and internal threats. The television viewer is not placated and comforted, but systematically horrified and frightened.” Hutchings & Tolz 2015, 223.

19 Pynnöniemi, Katri & Rácz, András (eds.): *Fog of Falsehood: Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine*. FIIA Report 45, 2016. Available at: http://www.fia.fi/en/publication/588/fog_of_falsehood/, 84–85, last accessed 17.10.2016.

20 Shevtsova, Lilia: “Forward to the Past in Russia.” *Journal of Democracy*, vol 26, no. 2, April 2015: 23–24.

emphasizes the need for state protection from these external threats.²¹ Hence, the security offered by conservative ideology is embedded in the idea of a strong state²² – and this logic seems to have been widely accepted by both the general population as well as within the power elites.

The so-called conservative turn is characterized by Russia's declining position in economic terms in the era of globalization. Russia has thus far not succeeded in solving the structural problems of its raw material-dependent economy, while the demographic crisis adds uncertainty to the future, and the ongoing freeze with the West has made hopes of a quick recovery even more unlikely. Viatcheslav Morozov has proposed that the contemporary Russia should be approached as a subaltern empire: Russia has never overcome its multi-faceted dependency on the West.²³ Somewhat consequently, the discussion about resentment as a constituting driver of Russian nationalism²⁴ has striven to show that the experiences of the early 1990s were traumatic for the general population – and that this is now being exploited in contemporary politics by projecting the blame for this trauma onto external actors.

Thus, one of the main assumptions of this paper is that today's Russian political leadership has chosen an ideological context of conservatism for its politics (which is not to say that the state leaders would have genuinely adopted conservative values themselves, which is another question beyond the scope of this paper). It is within this frame that the state-led nationalism exists and evolves. As a hypothesis, it is suggested that these conservative values will be present in the political texts produced by the state during the time frame of this study.

21 This interpretation is closely linked to the broad discussion of securitization theory: how speech acts are applied by political actors to portray existential threats, and then authoritarian or restrictive policies are legitimized as solutions to these threats. See e.g. Buzan et al. 1998.

22 Chebankova 2015a, 5.

23 Morozov, Viatcheslav: *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 1; 10–16.

24 Malinova, Olga: "Obsession with status and *ressentiment*: Historical backgrounds of the Russian discursive identity construction." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Volume 47, Issues 3–4, 2014: 291–303; Gudkov, Lev: *Ressentimentnyi natsionalizm*. *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniya*, No. 3–4 (118), iyul'-dekabr' 2014: 168.

4. MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY: LANGUAGE MATTERS

In this study, a set of texts outlining Russian state policy²⁵ will be analyzed. The selected texts include presidential addresses during the years 2012–2016, all of which were delivered by Vladimir Putin. According to the Law on Strategic Planning, the President’s annual address to the Federal Assembly is one of the key documents steering the strategic planning of the country, together with the federal policy documents on National Security, among others.²⁶ In this study, therefore, selected federal-level state programmes have been analyzed, including Federal Target Programmes on the Russian Language (2015) and Strengthening the Unity of the Russian Nation (2013), the Foundations of State Cultural Policy (2014), the Strategy of National Security (2015) and the Strategy of National Policy of the Russian Federation (2012). These documents provide information on the implementation of the state policies. Each such document begins with a description of the problem, and it is this assessment of the situation that is under scrutiny in this study.

The qualitative content analysis of these texts is geared towards tracing the conceptual and metaphorical choices of the state leadership in particular. Metaphors, such as “nation as us”, as well as key concepts, such as “multinational nation”, are a powerful way to narrate Russianness and therefore shape nationalism. Thus, these linguistic expressions are approached as a remarkable source of evidence for the thinking that prevails among the state leadership. It is assumed that by delineating them, the ideological situations behind decision-making and nation-building could be described.

In this Working Paper, the qualitative content analysis is structured as narrative analysis, the aim of which is to identify the main narratives of the nation in the official discourse during the years 2012–2016. A narrative, in its most simplistic form, is a story, usually consisting of at least two events having a consequential relationship. In this paper, the narrative concept is used to show that in the state perception the characteristics of the nation have historical roots – which, obviously, is also one component of communicating the importance of tradition to the audience. National narratives are a crucial means of nation-building, and their influence is often related to the bond in time and between generations – what is understood as the shared past also gives meaning to the shared future,²⁷ and it is in this context where the official discourse exerts considerable power.

The main questions vis-à-vis the material are related to the characteristics and limits of the nation, or “Russianness” in actual fact. It is thought that the original research question – *How does the state leadership shape the contemporary Russian nationalism?* – could best be answered by focusing on the way in which the texts portray the nation: Who are the people that comprise the nation, and what are seen as the common denominators? The same questions were addressed to the interviewees. Although the

25 A complete list of speeches and documents chosen for analysis is provided in the references.

26 Federal Law “On Strategic Planning in the Russian Federation” (“*O strategicheskoy planirovani v Rossiyskoy Federatsii*”), 28.6.2014, Chapter 3, Article 11/3. Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/38630/page/3>, last accessed 11.10.2016.

27 See e.g. Chatterje–Doody, P. N.: “Harnessing History: Narratives, Identity and Perceptions of Russia’s Post-Soviet role.” *Politics* 34 (2), 2014: 127; 134.

questionnaire allowed variation and included some more specific questions for the participants about their own political and civic activities, all of the interviews started with the definitions of “Russianness”, and the shared characteristics of the nation, after which the relationship between the citizen and the state was discussed.

5. THE MAIN NARRATIVES OF THE RUSSIAN NATION

In this chapter some of the key narratives in the Russian president's discourse and the concepts and metaphorical expressions used to communicate them are traced. A set of political documents is likewise explored in order to broaden the perspective to include other levels of the state leadership and, potentially, to compare these texts with each other. The narratives are then analyzed in the light of opinion poll results and the interview material.

5.1 The narrative of the united nation: "nation as us"

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the unity of the nation has demanded the state leadership's attention. Boris Yeltsin's concept of the civic Russian national identity did not endure, if it was ever genuinely accepted and, as Olga Malinova has explained, even after that the state leadership did not succeed in portraying mere state symbols as the uniting factors of the nation.²⁸ The federal target programme of "Strengthening the unity ...", which has as its main goal "strengthening the unity of the multinational nation of the Russian Federation", also acknowledges "weak all-Russian civic self-understanding"²⁹ as one of the most critical problems of the inter-ethnic relations within the country.

Hence, it is clear that the dominant narrative in the official discourse is that of a united nation. Portraying the nation as "us" is conventional in the speeches of top leaders, and is not confined to the Russian political tradition. It is perhaps one of the most obvious metaphorical expressions and widely used in all nation-state contexts;³⁰ framing the nation as "us" illustrates how the idea of the imagined community is reinforced in practice. It is thus by no means surprising that the idea of a united nation has been persistent in Putin's rhetoric, but the meanings and prerequisites applied to this unity are important. The idea is articulated with a narrative that emphasizes the nation's common denominators, among them its shared past. Since 2012, the unity of the people has been reinforced firstly by emphasizing the common denominators of the nation, and secondly by stressing the distinction between the nation and the "Other", portraying "us" as different from "them".

According to the official discourse, it is mainly culture, history, and language that are perceived as the common denominators of "us". This interpretation seems to hold true

28 Malinova, Olga: "V poiskah samykh sebya." *Nezavisimaya gazeta* 24.11.2015(b).

29 Federal target programme "Strengthening the unity of the Russian nation and the ethno-cultural development of the peoples of Russia (for the years 2014–2020)" ("*Federalnaya tselevaya programma 'Ukreplenie edinstva rossiyskoy natsii i etnokul'turnoe razvitie narodov Rossii (2014 – 2020 gody)*"). Confirmed by the Order of the President (No 718) on August 20, 2013. Available at <http://government.ru/docs/4022/>, last accessed 26.9.2016. All the texts have been read in their original Russian form, but the quotations have been taken from the official English translations, if available. If not, they have been translated from Russian into English by the author.

30 On naturalizing nationalism, see e.g. Billig, Michael: *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage Publications, 1995, 13–15.

also among the people in general. In the presidential speeches, their significance is stressed explicitly and implicitly:

“We must value the unique experience passed on to us by our forefathers. For centuries, Russia developed as a multi-ethnic nation (from the very beginning), a civilisation-state bonded by the Russian people, Russian language and Russian culture native for all of us, uniting us and preventing us from dissolving in this diverse world.”³¹

The reference to the fact that “we” are united by the Russian (*russkii*) nation, Russian language and Russian culture is noteworthy here, as it implies that “we” includes the Russian nation but is not limited to it. According to Helge Blakkisrud, this view shows how the “borders of this Russian ‘self’ were kept vague”, meaning that even though (ethnic) Russianness represented the core of the concept, other ethnicities were encouraged to “re-align” with the majority population.³² I would add that this re-alignment is expected, not only encouraged. As shown in the quotation above, the mentioned common denominators point to uniting the nation, but also preventing it from disappearing into the complex and diverse world. Therefore, belonging to “us” also has a protective function.

The notion of a shared culture is reinforced in many ways. For example, in the New Year’s addresses the president refers to the private sphere of life, describing cultural habits common to all, regardless of their religion or ethnicity: “... we look forward to it [the New Year] with anticipation, making wishes, giving gifts and traditionally seeing in the New Year with family and friends”.³³ An implicit way of portraying “our culture” is to use intertextual references to iconic writers, philosophers and other representatives of the canon.³⁴ These are obviously rhetorical means of illustrating the speech and are, again, used by many political leaders in their own contexts in order to highlight the assumed common cultural heritage of the nation.

31 President’s address to the Federal Assembly (*Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniyu*): 12 December 2012: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17118>, last accessed 26.9.2016.

32 Blakkisrud 2016, 255.

33 President’s New Year’s Eve address (*Novogodnee obrashchenie k grazhdanam Rossii*): 31 December 2014: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47446>, last accessed 26.9.2016.

34 In the presidential speeches, references were made to the poet Aleksandr Pushkin (Valdai speech 2013), the writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (Address to the Federal Assembly 2012), the political philosopher Ivan Ilyin (Address to the Federal Assembly 2014), and the prime minister during the time of Nicholas II, Pyotr Stolypin (Address to the Federal Assembly 2013), to name but a few. The figures mentioned represent the nationalist-conservative camp throughout Russian history, but one should refrain from drawing any direct conclusions from this as the material is limited.

Both the Foundations of State Cultural Policy³⁵ and the federal target programme “Russian language”³⁶ stress the role of the Russian language and culture in uniting the nation. In the Foundations of Cultural Policy text, the uniqueness of Russian culture is emphasized: “Russia’s historical path defined her cultural peculiarity, the particular qualities of the national mentality, and the value basis of the life of Russian society”. This sort of statement naturally leads to the next set of conceptual problems, such as the definition of the “national mentality” – which is indeed defined further in the document, but in a rather vague manner: “The ‘mentality of the Russian nation’ – a combination of intellectual, emotional, and cultural characteristics, value orientations and settings inherent in the Russian people”. The objectives of the cultural policy are said to be “formulating the harmonious development of an individual and strengthening the unity of Russian society through preferential cultural and humanitarian development”. Alongside culture, as it is widely understood, language is also one of the “fundamental factors uniting the multinational Russian nation, defining its originality and viability”.

The Russian language and culture are, however, not only seen as uniting Russians within the geographical and state borders of the Russian Federation, but also abroad. In the Federal target programme “Russian language”, it is stated that strengthening the position of the Russian language is a “strategic national priority”, and that widening the sphere of the Russian language will also eventually protect the geopolitical interests of Russia. The policy concept of the Russian world (*Russkii mir*) is connected to language and culture as the main markers of “Russianness” abroad. In spring 2014, Russian troops without any identifying insignia occupied Crimea in order to organize a referendum that was unrecognized internationally, but which was followed by the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation. During and after the annexation, the “nation as us” metaphor was deployed in the official discourse but even more so in societal commentaries: it was explained that in Crimea, there are “our people”.³⁷ In the official annexation celebrations, the slogan “We [are] together” (*My vmeste*) was used.

In the interviews conducted for this study, it was indeed language, culture and history that were most often (and usually first) mentioned among the factors that unite the nation. Usually these were also tied to each other: the concepts of language and culture, for instance, seem to overlap. The definitions of a unifying culture, for its part, were various – one interviewee explained that culture encompasses all non-biological factors of human life, while others mentioned popular Soviet cartoons or linguistic expressions and jokes as examples of the unifying power of cultural heritage. Interestingly, some strongly emphasized that Russianness (*russkost*) “is in the head” (*v golove*) of a person, and does not depend on external characteristics related to ethnicity. I will take a closer look at this aspect in section 5.3 of this chapter.

35 Foundations of State Cultural Policy (“*Osnovy gosudarstvennoy kul'turnoy politiki*”). Confirmed by Order of the President (No 808) on December 24, 2014. Available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47325>, last accessed 26.9.2016.

36 Federal target programme “Russian language” for the years 2016–2020 (“*Federalnaya tselevaya programma ‘Russkiy yazyk’ na 2016–2020 gody*”). Confirmed by Decree of the Government (No 481) on May 20, 2015. Available at <http://government.ru/docs/18169/>, last accessed 26.9.2016.

37 Teper, Yuri: “Official Russian identity discourse in the light of the annexation of Crimea: national or imperial?” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 32, No. 4, 2016: 383.

5.2 The narrative of the “victorious nation”

The notion of a shared, common history of a nation creates strong feelings of belonging and is, therefore, closely connected to nation-building. The state leadership has the power to use (and abuse) history by choosing the parts of the past it wishes to highlight, or discount. In the state leadership discourse, a common history is presented as a strong uniting factor and, like common culture, is again depicted as strengthening the bonds between “us”, the nation. In the presidential speeches “our” history is a source of national pride: “We must be proud of our history, and we have things to be proud of. Our entire, uncensored history [*vsya nasha istoriya bez iz'yatii*] must be a part of Russian identity”.³⁸ History is expected to be understood as a whole. The key aspects of Russian and Soviet history stressed by the president are those related to greatness and victory, such as the Second World War in particular. The victory in 1945 is framed as a formative experience for the nation – the event that made “us” what “we” are today:

“In the outgoing year of 2015, we marked the 70th anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War. Our history, the experience of our parents and grandparents, their unity in times of trouble and their willpower will always serve as an example for us.”³⁹

The war should duly not be forgotten. In a Victory Day speech in 2013, it was stated that the “victory in May 1945 is the sound of a great bell that celebrates life without war, a sacred symbol of loyalty to our Motherland which lives in each of us ...”.⁴⁰ Putin has also ended his Victory Day speech on several occasions by greeting the “victorious nation” (*narod-pobeditel'*)⁴¹ – a term which was used by Joseph Stalin on the first Victory Day in 1945. In Putin’s parlance, the term suggests that the victory (of good over evil) did not take place just once, but rather is an enduring characteristic of the nation. However, it is clear that the collective memory is also being carefully stage-managed in the official discourse. Although memories of repressions, losses and sacrifices are regarded as forming a part of the national identity as well, great sacrifices and tribulations (*ispytanie*) experienced during wartime are always – and need to be – inextricably connected to glory and heroism.

In 2015, the 70th anniversary of Victory Day was commemorated with a particularly massive military parade and ceremonies as expected, but the celebrations were scarcely smaller the following year. Victory Day is clearly the most important national holiday for the state. This was already the case in the Soviet era, especially under the leadership

38 President’s address at the meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club (*Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba “Valday”*): 19 September 2013: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>, last accessed 26.9.2016.

39 President’s New Year’s Eve address (*Novogodnee obrashchenie k grazhdanam Rossii*): 31 December 2015: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51128>, last accessed 26.9.2016.

40 Speech by the President at the Military Parade in Red Square (*Voennyi parad na Krasnoy ploshadi*), 9 May 2013: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/18089>, last accessed 26.9.2016.

41 Within the time frame of this study, the term was used in 2012–2015 in the Victory Day speeches, but not in 2016.

of Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, when the victory over Nazism became one of the formative events in the official national narrative, putting even the October Revolution in the shade.⁴²

The political use of history is, of course, not unique to Russian leaders, but transforming the victory over Nazism into a sacred symbol that unites the whole nation also restricts the permitted modes of remembrance.⁴³ The significance of the victory is in many ways connected to today's political situation. Kolesnikov, writing about the mythology of permanent war as one of the legitimizing features of the Russian state, says that “[n] early all of Moscow's modern wars are linked, thematically or otherwise, to the Great Patriotic War”, and “by blurring realities on the ground, government propaganda is able to portray any domestic opposition to war as inherently immoral”.⁴⁴ It is emblematic that 85 per cent of Russians today say that there were and still are members of their family who were participants (*uchastniki*) in the Great Patriotic War, which Aleksey Levinson interprets as signalling emotions, not just clear statistics.⁴⁵

Indeed, during the research period, war pervaded the official discourse. Russian troops in Crimea and “volunteers” in Donbas, involvement in the Syrian war, tensions with Turkey, and the hardening discourse towards the US and NATO occupied a lot of space in the official discourse from the year 2014 onwards. The change was particularly apparent between the presidential addresses in 2012 and 2013, when the emphasis was on domestic issues and economic challenges, and the addresses that followed after that: in 2014, the same Federal Assembly address focused almost entirely on foreign policy matters. The actual events as well as the way in which they were presented had several consequences in peoples' minds. Firstly, the interest towards politics and foreign politics in particular was reported to be increasing. Secondly, even though before the Russian involvement in Syria people in general did not see the need for such involvement, they were quick to lend their support to the actions.⁴⁶ Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, an opinion poll by WCIOM reveals that in 2015–2016, respondents rated international

42 Malinova, Olga: *Aktual'noe proshloe. Simvolicheskaya politika vlastvuyushechei elity i dilemmy rossiyskoy identichnosti*. Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2015(a), 88–90.

43 For instance, an art gallery exhibiting critical artwork under the title “We won” (*My pobedili*) was searched by the police in Moscow on the eve of Victory Day in 2015. Some works were confiscated and the gallery was later accused of “extremism” (*Izvestiya* 2015). In a similar manner, the TV Rain channel (*Dozhd*) was dropped from several cable network packages in early 2014 when a question was posed in one of its programmes as to whether the besieged Leningrad should have been surrendered to Germany in order to avoid casualties (*Novaya gazeta* 2014). The president's press secretary, Dmitri Peskov, commented on the case in an interview by saying that the channel had “crossed the red line”, even though it had not necessarily broken the law (*Dozhd* 2014).

44 Kolesnikov, Andrei: “Do Russians want war?” Carnegie article, 14.6.2016. Available at: <http://carnegie.ru/2016/06/14/do-russians-want-war/j1u8>, last accessed 17.10.2016.

45 Levinson, Aleksei: “Nashe 'my': Voyna ne uhodit.” *Vedomosti* 21.6.2016: <http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/columns/2016/06/21/646110-voyna-ne-uhodit>, last accessed 17.10.2016.

46 “Soyuzniki i 'vragi' Rossii, Evropeyskaya integratsiya”, Levada Center press release, 2.6.2016 (2016a): <http://www.levada.ru/2016/06/02/13400/>, last accessed 17.10.2016.

conflict or war and the rising price or supply of commodities as their two foremost concerns.⁴⁷

The myth of permanent war and the strong narrative of a nation that wins that war is closely linked to the manifestation of a great power. The idea of “great-poweriness” seems to be widely supported by the people. Since 2014, the number of respondents who perceive Russia as a great power has been consistently above 60% (67% in May 2016).⁴⁸ As one interviewee put it, “in the foreign [policy] context, Russians are only concerned about one [thing] – that Russia would become a great power (*derzhava*), that’s all”. This is one reason why the Crimean annexation gained such wide and lasting support among the public: a great power is perceived as one that occupies and thus gains territories, does not lose them.

According to the opinion polls, Russian (*rossiiskaya*) history has long remained one of the most significant sources of national pride.⁴⁹ This was also confirmed in the interviews. The interviewees emphasized the role of history as a uniting factor, mentioning it from time to time in connection with culture, more like a subject one learns at school, and sometimes in more general, or emotionally loaded ways. The war and especially respect (*uvazhenie*) for war veterans were mentioned as examples of the common history. This is perhaps unsurprising because the interviews were mainly conducted in late April, and the Victory Day preparations were already underway in the streets. Moreover, the interviewees were, on average, of the younger generation, and according to sociological studies young people have strong feelings towards the past. Sociologist Elena Omelchenko has shown that the youth of today gain their knowledge of the Soviet past through their grandparents and not so much through their parents, which affects their perception of that era: they feel the Soviet nostalgia despite – and perhaps thanks to – the fact that they have not experienced the Soviet reality themselves.⁵⁰ Interestingly, Omelchenko dubs today’s young Russians “the Crimea generation”.⁵¹

47 “Indeks strahov”, WCIOM 2016: http://wciom.ru/news/ratings/indeks_strahov/, last accessed 17.10.2016.

48 “Natsionalnaya gordost”, Levada Center press release 30.6.2016 (2016b): <http://www.levada.ru/2016/06/30/natsionalnaya-gordost/>, last accessed 17.10.2016.

49 Ibid.

50 Omelchenko, Elena: “Does Soviet Matter? State Politics and Family Memory Cultures: Young People and Their (Grand) Parents.” Paper presentation at the 15th Annual Aleksanteri Conference, “Culture and Russian Society”, 21–23 October 2015, University of Helsinki, Finland.

51 “Sotsiolog Elena Omelchenko – o pokolenii Kryma, pragmatichnom patriotizme i ischeznovenii gotov”. The Village, 27.3.2015. Available at: <http://www.the-village.ru/village/people/city-news/178619-omelchenko>, last accessed 17.10.2016.

The popularity of the Victory Day celebrations and the commemorative Immortal Regiment march (*Bessmertnyi polk*)⁵² in particular have shown that the victorious nation narrative resonates strongly among the Russian public. In the case of the march, it was clear that even though the event ensued from and is at least partly maintained due to a private incentive, the publicity and popularity it has gained have also been beneficial from the point of view of the official celebrations. The Victory Day celebrations and work with war veterans is a common theme of volunteer work, which in general is very popular today, especially among young people. What remains to be seen, however, is whether the emotional attachment will fade as the memory becomes more distant, and the generations with first-hand experience of the war diminish. The metaphor of the “victorious nation”, reinforced with the myth of permanent war, seems to suggest that the narrative is of a persistent nature. In its emphasis on unity among all Soviet nationalities who fought together, this particular narrative is also closely linked to the narrative of the multinational country, which will be elaborated next.

5.3 The narrative of a multinational nation: a “multinational genetic code”

A further unifying narrative is related to the ethnic component of nationalism. From the point of view of the state, the ethnic diversity within the Russian Federation is a serious and multi-layered question of societal stability. In order to maintain this stability, the state needs to simultaneously manage the xenophobic attitudes among the population, prevent the extreme nationalist movements from fuelling ethnic tensions within the country, and articulate its respect for the titular nationalities of the country – which is complicated by the state’s fear of separatism.

The attempts to manage these challenges, and the first one in particular, can be seen in the speeches delivered by the president during 2012, and especially in late 2013. As Hutchings and Tolz have shown, the ways in which migrants were referred to on Russian television changed in 2012. At that time, an “anti-migration campaign” took off across the main television channels, fuelled by some well-known intellectuals and TV personalities, who started to express their xenophobic sentiments in public.⁵³ The anti-migrant attitudes emerged during late 2013 when ethnic clashes broke out in Moscow’s suburbs, reminding the state leadership of the latent potential of extreme nationalist movements (see e.g. Laine 2015). It is clear that the presidential speeches were addressing these developments and although explicit linkages were not necessarily made, the president was clearly condemning ethnic nationalism in his address to the Federal Assembly in October 2013, when the xenophobic attitudes towards migrants⁵⁴ were at their peak:

52 The march draws ordinary citizens marching with portraits of their relatives who took part or were killed in the Great Patriotic War. Marches of a similar nature have been arranged in several Russian cities at least since 2012.

53 Hutchings & Tolz 2015, 228.

54 In the opinion polls (e.g. Levada 2014), they are usually labelled as “coming from the Southern Republics” (*vyhodtsy iz Yuzhnyh Respublik*), which is a reference to the people of Caucasia and Central Asia. In the Russian discourse on migrants it is noteworthy that even citizens of the Russian Federation, namely the inhabitants of Northern Caucasia, are often considered migrants, representing the “Other”.

“The most important topic requiring frank discussion in our society today is interethnic relations. [...] Such [interethnic] tensions are not provoked by representatives of particular nationalities, but by people devoid of culture and respect for traditions, both their own and those of others. [...] Together we must rise to the challenge; we must safeguard interethnic peace and thus the unity of our society, the unity and integrity of the Russian state.”⁵⁵

Since 2014, however, opinion polls have shown a moderate decrease in xenophobic attitudes towards migrants. The decrease in xenophobia⁵⁶ is most likely a result of media attention being drawn elsewhere and a corresponding shift of focus among the public and in the official discourse. But xenophobia has far from disappeared since 2013. In July 2014, 52% of respondents either fully or partially supported the slogan “Russia for Russians”,⁵⁷ and in December 2014, 35% of respondents said that the original (*korennyi*) nationality should have broader rights in society than those representing other nationalities, opposing the 51% who said that everyone should have equal rights irrespective of their nationality.⁵⁸

Thus, the narrative of a multinational nation has always been presented as an answer to the ethnonationalist challenge, but during the time frame of this study, it has also started to serve as a value-oriented signifier between Russia and the West. In an article for *Nezavisimaya gazeta* in 2012, Putin was already writing about the harmful multiculturalism that “lifts to the absolute the rights of a minority to differ”,⁵⁹ and which leads to the fear of losing national and state identity. Multiculturalism, therefore, is an outcome of the “wrong” policy that Western countries have adopted, whereas the Russian tradition of uniting culture and multinationalism is the constructive and successful one. The narrative of multiculturalism as a complete failure gained ground over time, and was repeated in 2013 and 2015.⁶⁰ It comes close to the reasoning previously adopted by other Russian nationalist groups that promoted the idea of the Russian nation state. As one interviewee of such a camp put it, the need to resist multiculturalism is like preserving the colours on a palette: by mixing all the colours, the painter ends up having

55 President’s address to the Federal Assembly (*Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniyu*): 12 December 2013: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>, last accessed 26.9.2016.

56 It should be noted, however, that as attitudes towards migrants have seemingly become more tolerant since 2014, hatred towards other nationalities, such as Americans and Ukrainians, has increased sharply (Levada 2016a).

57 “Natsionalizm, ksenofobiya i migratsiya”, Levada Center press release, 26.8.2014: <http://www.levada.ru/26-08-2014/natsionalizm-ksenofobiya-i-migratsiya>, last accessed 17.10.2016.

58 “Mezhnatsional’nye otnosheniya: monitoring”, FOM 22.12.2014: <http://fom.ru/Obraz-zhizni/11876>, last accessed 17.10.2016.

59 Putin, Vladimir: “Rossiya i natsional’nyi vopros.” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 23.01.2012: http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html, last accessed 26.9.2016.

60 Valdai 2013; President’s address at the meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club (*Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba “Valday”*) 22 October 2015: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50548>, last accessed 26.9.2016.

only one shade of brown. But, the interviewee also pointed out that while Russians should have the “leading role” (*vedushaya rol'*) in the ideal society, everyone should have equal rights. This then leads to the next problematic definition, namely what would this role then mean in practice.

An important factor in this discussion are the conceptual choices related to “Russianness”. Political scientist Marlène Laruelle has noted that the established and popular view according to which *russkii* refers to linguistic and ethnic Russians whereas *rossiiskii* refers to the state and all Russian citizens including ethnic minorities, is far too narrow to encompass all the meanings of Russianness. She proposes that *russkii* in today’s discourse has to do with reinforcing the historical unity of the Eastern Slavs through an older connotation of the term, as well as asserting the “messianic” destiny of Russia.⁶¹ In the light of the material in this study, it can certainly be confirmed that the term *russkii* cannot be explicitly related to ethnic or even linguistic Russianness.

The multinational character of the nation has been stressed in the official discourse. In official policy documents, the ethnic and confessional diversity of the Russian people is seen as something that needs to be preserved and protected.⁶² Thus, the message of the political programmes and the president is univocal, but their conceptual choices reveal a clear difference. Throughout both the Foundations of State Cultural Policy (2014) and the federal target programme “Russian language” (2015) the nation is described with the epithet ‘*rossiiskaya*’, while simultaneously insisting that the “uniting key role in the historical consciousness of the multinational Russian nation belongs to the Russian language, the great Russian culture”.

The president, for his part, is not sensitive to the more ethnically loaded concepts, and does not avoid using the word *russkii*. There might be several reasons for this. He either seems to perceive “us” first and foremost as ethnic Russians (*russkie*), not citizens of Russia (*rossiiskie* or *rossiyane*), or he does not consider that conceptual consistency in relation to these matters is of great importance, or, perhaps most importantly, that conceptual inconsistency is a conscious choice and serves a political function. When “us” in the presidential discourse *might* as well mean the ethnic Russian majority, depending on the listener’s point of view, the message speaks to the audience more widely.

In two of the interviews, the term *rossiiskii* was directly connected to Boris Yeltsin and said to be both artificial and outdated. One explicitly pro-Putin interviewee explained that the term was invented in order to decrease the dominant position of Russianness. This then led to a situation where being Russian was “shameful” (*styдно*). However, some of the interviewees, representing various political backgrounds, explained the term *russkii* as ethnically inclusive in the first instance, and also defended the view that the term might simultaneously represent some other nationality (such as Tatar or Buryatian,

61 Laruelle, Marlène: “Misinterpreting Nationalism: Why *Russkii* is Not a Sign of Ethnonationalism.” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo (416), January 2016. Available at: http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm416_Laruelle_Jan2016_0.pdf, last accessed 17.10.2016.

62 Strategy of the State National Policy of the Russian Federation until the year 2025 (“*Strategiya gosudarstvennoy natsional'noy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii na period do 2025 goda*”). Confirmed by Order of the President (No 1666) on December 19, 2012. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/36512/page/1>, last accessed 26.9.2016; Federal target programme “Strengthening the unity ...”, 2013.

which were sometimes used as examples). Others suggested a further precondition that a “*russkii*” person should accept the Russian culture and speak the Russian language, but not all mentioned this. All in all, the understanding of the concepts hints that now that *rossiiskii* is no longer in active usage, *russkii* has evolved to potentially include many nationalities, which might be an (indirect) consequence of the emphasis on the multinational nature of Russia in the official discourse.

5.4 The narrative of the moral nation: shared traditional values

In the official discourse, culture, language and history all come together in what are termed common or traditional values. The scope of this discussion is vast and cannot be covered as a sub-section of one study, but it is essentially tied together with the perception of “nation as us”. “Our” common values form an important tool for Othering, and it is in this sense that they have been applied for a long time. Traditional Russianness is often presented as opposing the West in particular – as Vera Tolz has put it, “[e]ver since Peter the Great’s reforms, the West has served as the main constituent other for Russians”.⁶³ The comparison with the West has taken various forms in the course of history. Neither the habit of depicting the West as the main “Other” nor portraying it as dwelling in “moral decline”⁶⁴ is a new phenomenon, but they have become more evident again during the past few years, especially since 2013.

Presenting the Russian nation as a united entity that shares the same values has been a vivid element of Putin’s initiatives since the very beginning of his public political career. There is some variation within the set of traditional values over time, but some of the “unique Russian values” such as patriotism, great-poweriness, state-centredness (*gosudarstvennichestvo*) and social solidarity (as presented by Putin in his “millennium article” as early as 1999)⁶⁵ seem to remain even though the emphasis varies. The idea of common and unique values derives from Russian history dating back to the 19th century and should therefore not be connected solely to Putin. That said, there is a linkage between past interpretations of early Slavophile thought and the current conservative standpoint of the Russian leadership. The intellectual history of Russian conservatism is discussed elsewhere,⁶⁶ but it needs to be noted that the ideological traits of Putin-era conservatism have not emerged in contemporary Russia but have rather been re-deployed.

63 Tolz, Vera. *Russia. Inventing the Nation*. London: Arnold Publishers, 2001, 69.

64 On this discussion, see e.g. Horvath, Robert: “The Reinvention of ‘Traditional Values’: Nataliya Narochnitskaya and Russia’s Assault on Universal Human Rights.” *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 68, No. 5, July 2016: 873; Østbø 2016, 177–179.

65 Tyldum, Guri & Kolstø, Pål. “Value Consensus and Social Cohesion in Russia.” In *Nation-Building and Common Values in Russia*, edited by Pål Kolstø & Helge Blakkisrud, 29–57. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2004, 1–5; Kolstø, Pål: “Nation-Building in Russia: A Value-Oriented Strategy.” In *Nation-Building and Common Values in Russia*, edited by Pål Kolstø & Helge Blakkisrud. 1–27. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004, 37.

66 See e.g. Chebankova 2015a.

Within the time frame of this study, the traditional Russian values were decisively embedded in the political rhetoric in 2012. A clear demonstration of this is the quest for spiritual bonds that would strengthen the country from within, discussed at length by Putin in his address to the federal assembly in 2012:

“Today, Russian society suffers from apparent deficit of spiritual values [*defitsit dukhovnyh skrep*] such as charity, empathy, compassion, support and mutual assistance. A deficit of things that have always, throughout our entire history, made us stronger and more powerful; these are the things we have always been proud of.”⁶⁷

Since then, the interpretation that shared values form the basis of national identity has been reiterated in the president’s addresses. The shared values, despite being an enduring component of the nation-building discourse of the state, are nonetheless in flux. Still in 2012 the emphasis relating to shared spiritual bonds (referred to by the term *dukhovnye skrepy* at that time) was clearly on the individual characteristics of a person, albeit in relation to the collective. But later, especially in 2014, the shared traditional values were described in a way that stressed the moral responsibility of a citizen in relation to the state.

Throughout the research period there are relatively few cases when the common values have been explicitly defined, but one good illustration can be found in the Strategy of National Security (2015) in the section that describes the meaning of culture:

“The traditional Russian spiritual-ethical values include prioritizing the spiritual over the material, protection of human life, the rights and freedoms of the human being, family, creative work, serving the Fatherland, moral and ethical norms, humanism, mercy, justice, helping each other, collectivism, historical unity of the peoples of Russia, and continuity of the history of our Motherland.”⁶⁸

Here, too, the definition remains vague because it is essentially a listing of very complex terms that should be further explained in order to make sense of the meaning of this whole. For example, the “family” or “moral and ethical norms” are not explained, but they are still expected to be common values for all Russians. In an earlier section of the same strategy, the “traditional Russian spiritual-ethical values (*traditsionnye rossiiskie dukhovno-nravstvennye tsennosti*)” are mentioned in another context, which is, perhaps, more to the point:

“The traditional Russian spiritual-ethical values are being revived. The emerging generation is forming a respectful relationship towards the history of Russia. Consolidation of the civil society is taking place around common values that form the basis of the statehood, such as freedom and independence of Russia, humanism,

67 Address to the Federal Assembly 2012.

68 “Maintaining and increasing” these values as the basis of Russian society is, according to the strategy, a strategic objective for the maintenance of national security in the sphere of culture: Strategy of National Security (“*Strategiya natsional’noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii*”). Confirmed by Order of the President (No 683) on December 31, 2015, article 78. Available at: <http://www.rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>, last accessed 26.9.2016.

international peace, unity of the cultures of multinational people of the Russian Federation, respect for family and confessional values, [and] patriotism.”⁶⁹

It is interesting that patriotism is included in the list as such. Even in his Valdai speech in 2013 the president stated that patriotism should be understood as a precondition for criticism in the political debate:

“For all the differences in our views, debates about identity and about our national future are impossible unless their participants are patriotic. Of course I mean patriotism in the purest sense of the word. Too often in our nation’s history, instead of opposition to the government we have been faced with opponents of Russia itself.”⁷⁰

Setting clear limits on the discussion of national identity – among other things – is exactly what makes a genuinely pluralistic debate on values essentially impossible. Patriotism, as well as all the other components of the shared value collection, could be defined in various ways, but the only accepted definition is that of the establishment.

There are three notions about the recent definitions that are crucially important for the future of Russian society. Firstly, as it says in the Foundations of State Cultural Policy, civil society is consolidated according to the shared value basis. This means that there will be less space in that society for those who do not wish to, or who are not able to, accept the traditional values. Secondly, the shared values cover not only the public sphere of an individual but also extend to the private sphere of life as well by articulating sanctioned morals, sexuality and religious attitudes from above. Thirdly, by including the claim that traditional values are the unifying characteristic of the nation in the Strategy of National Security, opposing these values becomes a question of security as well.

In the president’s discourse, the multiethnic and multiconfessional⁷¹ nature of the Russian Federation is stressed. The shared values are described primarily as traditional or spiritual – which would make it possible to interpret them in an inclusive manner, in the sense that they would include the other traditional religions⁷² as well. But here, too, the year 2014 marked a turning point. Firstly, after the Crimean annexation, the president made references to the “sacral meaning” of Crimea for the Russian nation, drawing

69 Ibid.

70 Address delivered during the meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club 2013.

71 On the religious diversity, see e.g. the President’s address at the Valdai forum in 2013: “It is precisely the state-civilisation model that has shaped our state polity. It has always sought to flexibly accommodate the ethnic and religious specificity of particular territories, ensuring diversity in unity. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and other religions are an integral part of Russia’s identity, its historical heritage and the present-day lives of its citizens. The main task of the state, as enshrined in the Constitution, is to ensure equal rights for members of traditional religions and atheists, and the right to freedom of conscience for all citizens.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>, last accessed 17.10.2016.

72 According to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, it is a secular state with four officially recognized traditional religions – Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism.

direct lines between Orthodox history and the nation. Secondly, later that year, the Foundations of State Cultural Policy described this relationship as follows:

“In the formulation of the value system of Russia, Orthodoxy played a special role. Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, [and] other religions and confessions, traditional of our Fatherland, also did their share in shaping the national-cultural self-understanding of the peoples of Russia. No confession nor nationality divides, and should not divide, the peoples of Russia.”⁷³

Here, it is clear that inclusiveness borders on the understanding of a hierarchy: the multinational nation is actually unified by ethnic Russianness, just as multiconfessionality is reinforced by the “special role” of the Orthodox faith. According to the official discourse, all nationalities and confessions are part of the Russian state identity, but only some of them delineate that identity today. Throughout the research period, the presidential discourse has emphasized the concern about the rights of the majority over the minorities,⁷⁴ and the rights of the Russian nationality over others.⁷⁵

The narrative of a united nation that holds shared values constitutes a form of othering *within* the country as well: every true member of the nation is expected to embrace these values. In other words, the ethnic and confessional diversity as well as the complexity of identities among “us” is accepted – and even taken pride in – to a certain extent, but the variations need to take place within the limits that are defined by the shared values (a key value being patriotism – a view that was again repeated in 2016⁷⁶). Further, embracing those values, in turn, requires respect for the common culture and history. The ambiguity of the shared values as the core of the national identity leads to the conclusion that the shared value basis might also change if those who have the power to define it should so desire. From the point of view of an individual citizen, this logic is sinister as national unity has been securitized: those unwilling to adopt the shared values, or presenting alternative interpretations of the shared culture or common history, risk being accused of posing a threat to national security. A clear message is being sent to the people by the state leadership that only by accepting the traditional values and being patriotic can one truly belong to “us”, the nation.

However, it seems that since the traditional values are strongly supported by the majority of people, the narrative of the moral Russian nation seems rather durable. Opposition is both portrayed by the media as unpatriotic and understood in those terms by the general population. Interviewees both from oppositional movements and LGBT networks reveal the hardship of the non-traditional segments of society: oppositional actors are labelled unpatriotic or as having dubious morality, not to mention that visible opposition figures also face the threat of physical violence and even death. One interviewee, representing the liberal opposition, said that it is hard to find people “who

73 Foundations of State Cultural Policy 2014.

74 Addresses at the meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club 2013 and 2015.

75 Nezavisimaya gazeta 2012.

76 Meeting with the core group of the Leaders Club (*Vstrecha s aktivom Kluba liderov*), 3 February 2016: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51263>, last accessed 26.9.2016.

would be ready to risk their lives” for politics. In February 2015, well-known opposition politician Boris Nemtsov was murdered in the centre of Moscow.

For the sexual and gender minorities it is impossible to create a positive context for their message in public. This is largely due to the legislation that prohibits the dissemination of “gay propaganda” to minors, but public opinion also generally condemns non-heterosexual relations. In a poll conducted in March 2015, 65% of respondents expressed negative feelings (reserve, irritation, fear) towards gay people.⁷⁷ A peculiar example of the promotion of traditional sexuality has been the reluctance of state officials to deal with the alarming rise in HIV infections, dispensing advice instead about the traditional family model and sexual morals that should prevent the disease.⁷⁸

An effective way of (rhetorically) excluding someone from the nation is to claim that they serve “foreign interests” instead of “national” ones. In an address given by the president after the Crimean referendum in March 2014, he mentioned the term “national traitor”, linking it indirectly to statements made by “Western politicians”:

“Some Western politicians are already threatening us with not just sanctions but also the prospect of increasingly serious problems on the domestic front. I would like to know what it is they have in mind exactly: action by a fifth column, this disparate bunch of ‘national traitors’ [*raznogo roda ‘natsional-predatelay’*], or are they hoping to put us in a worsening social and economic situation so as to provoke public discontent?”⁷⁹

In other presidential addresses chosen for this study, the concept of “national traitor” is not used, but it has become more commonplace in the traditional and social media.⁸⁰ Branding political actors or civic activists as unpatriotic has also occurred with increasing frequency since 2014 – something that was mentioned in an interview with a pro-Putin activist, who accused opposition activist Aleksey Navalny and some other liberal opposition figures of serving “foreign interests”. But another interviewee, who also identified himself as pro-Putin and pro-government, explicitly said that no one can be excluded from the nation on the basis of their values. Here, the state policy to

77 “Nevidimoe men’shinstvo: k probleme gomofobii v Rossii”, Levada Center press release, 5.5.2015: <http://www.levada.ru/2015/05/05/nevidimoe-menshinstvo-k-probleme-gomofobii-v-rossii/>, last accessed 17.10.2016.

78 “V SPIDe ne nashli nichego russkogo.” *Kommersant* 31.5.2016: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3000818>, last accessed 17.10.2016.

79 Presidential address (*Obrashchenie prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii*), 18 March 2014: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>, last accessed 26.9.2016.

80 A recent example was the debate in early 2016 initiated by Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, when he blamed Russian liberals for betraying their country. Some cases also centred on the Rio Olympics in the summer of 2016. See e.g. “Eshche raz o natsional-predatel’stve”, *Nezavisimaya gazeta* 19.1.2016; “Ritorika dlya neponyatlivyh”, *The New Times* 25.1.2016; “Russian athlete branded a ‘traitor’ over plans to compete under neutral flag in Rio”, *The Guardian* 13.7.2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/13/russian-athlete-competing-under-a-neutral-flag-at-the-olympics-branded-a-traitor>, accessed 17.10.2016.

connect the expected moral values to national security is crucial. Even if one chooses not to embrace the shared Russian values, resisting them in public has become increasingly difficult.

Finally, the narrative of the moral nation rests upon the conservative value set of the majority, the traditional religious values, as well as prejudices, such as homophobia. However, it is very hard to evaluate whether this narrative is genuinely embraced by the population. As Elena Chebankova has explained, the nationalist-conservative camp in Russian society is significantly stronger than the liberal one.⁸¹ This also affects how the state leadership shapes nationalism: strengthening authoritarianism helps to prevent the minorities from challenging the majority, especially when the majority is granted the moral high ground in the official discourse.

81 Chebankova, Elena: "Competing ideologies of Russia's Civil Society." *Europe-Asia Studies* 67 (2), 2015(b): 244-268.

6. CONCLUSIONS: NATIONALISM OF THE MORAL MAJORITY

The dominant narrative of the nation is the one stressing its unity. It should be noted that this narrative is rather universal, and intuitively well received among the people. The united nation is one answer to the confusion and resentment caused by the experience of losing national identity with the collapse of the Soviet Union. From 2012 onwards, this unity has been linked to the notion of a strong state: belonging to the nation has a protective function because the world is a dangerous place. First, the threat perception in the official discourse was connected to the destruction of traditional values, caused by globalization, but after 2014 in particular it has been more explicitly pointed out that this protection is needed against external threats.

The factors that unite the nation are language, culture, history and conservative, traditional values. These characteristics of an explicit nation are communicated by the state in three additional narratives: the nation shares a common history, victorious in nature; the nation has a multinational “genetic code”; and the nation is moral in relation to other nations. Still in 2013, the narrative of the multinational nation was an important tool in managing the deep-rooted xenophobia towards migrants, but since 2014, attention has shifted outside this focus. Hence, the narrative of the victorious nation – reinforced by the myth of permanent war and the portrayal of external threats – together with the narrative of the nation that shares righteous values has become more significant. The narrative of the victorious nation seems to be embraced by the public for two reasons: firstly, there is the factual event in history which supports this narrative, and secondly, the experience of the war is still being relayed through the generations.

While the ethnic or religious diversity among the Russian population is stressed by the president as an everlasting feature of the country, the shared values are expected to cover the whole population equally. This set of values, as well as the key concepts included in it such as patriotism, is only loosely defined, which serves a functional purpose from the point of view of the state. Ambiguity makes it possible to redefine the key concepts when needed, and thus to stay ahead in the conceptual battle.

At the level of discourse, the contemporary Russian state-led nationalism does not rest upon ethnic or civic features, should one choose to apply such categories. Nor can the nation be defined solely in cultural terms because even though the Russian culture is mentioned as the unifying factor, in fact the nation needs to share something *more* than that: namely, the traditional values that are communicated by the state and those in power. State-led nationalism highlights the aspect of moral responsibility, which is also the key feature that distinguishes “us” from “others”. In other words, the definition of the nation is ethnically inclusive, but at the same time it is highly exclusive towards the dissent, liberalism, and opposition deemed unpatriotic by the state.

Hence, the main objective of the official texts is not only to show that Russianness is inclusive, that it includes people of all ethnic backgrounds or religions, but more importantly, to show that this inclusiveness actually requires embracing the common traditional Russian values. These values are by no means an explicit collection, but some of them seem persistent – such as patriotism and morals. A true Russian, according to the official discourse, shares the moral values of the nation. It is here where the nationalist narratives meet the other characteristics of the state, increasing its influence over the citizens. Today’s state-led nationalism in Russia is built upon authoritarianism,

conservative thought, the authority of the majority, and the notion of a moral nation vis-à-vis other nations. The narrative of a united nation is no longer merely seeking common denominators, but also drawing the lines between those who have accepted these denominators and those who cannot do so.

The dividing lines between the strong majority and the small and – to a large extent – invisible minorities are deepening. The official discourse has been stressing the importance of the multiethnic and multiconfessional nature of the country, but at the same time it has clearly demonstrated a hierarchical understanding of the various components of the nation. The official discourse is relying upon and appealing to acceptance by the majority, which it duly receives, but at the same time it is ostracizing the minorities further to the margins of society.

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Mikhail Butrimov, Representative of the Tigers of Rodina (*TIGRy Rodiny*), Moscow

“Dasha”, Member of the All-Russian LGBT net (*Rossiyskaya LGBT-net*), Moscow

Maria Katasonova, Representative of the National Liberating Movement (*Natsional'no-osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie; NOD*), Moscow

Mikhail Konev, Representative of the PARNAS party, Moscow

Anastasiya Kovalyeva, Representative of the Eurasian Youth Union (*Evraziyskiy soyuz molodezhi*), Moscow

Dmitri Mashenskikh, Representative of the New faces project (*Novye litsa*) supported by the All-Russian National Front, Moscow

Makar Mikhlyantsev, together with other representatives of the Youth project SET' (*Molodezhnyi proekt Set'*), Moscow

Egor Prosvirnin, Representative of the Sputnik i pogrom blog, Moscow (interview conducted via e-mail)

Sofiya Rusova, Representative of the youth organisation of the Yabloko party, Moscow

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