

**RUSSIA'S NATIONALITIES POLICY BEFORE  
AND AFTER THE 2020 CONSTITUTIONAL  
AMENDMENTS**

**IS THE "ETHNIC TURN" CONTINUING?**

**Veera Laine & Konstantin Zamyatin**

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## IS THE “ETHNIC TURN” CONTINUING?

In January 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed a set of constitutional amendments, aiming to secure the continuity of his power in the years to come. At the same time, the amendments allowed ideological visions on national identity to be inscribed in the Constitution.

Since summer 2020, the Constitution has enhanced the symbolic status of the Russian language, which is now not only the state language but also the language of those who speak it (i.e. of “ethnic” Russians or “Russian-speakers”), implicitly referred to as the state-founding people. These provisions, together with support for compatriots abroad, not only continue the turn observable since the 2010s in Russia’s nation-building from a civic vision towards an ethnic vision of nation, but also challenge the existing interpretations of state borders. The provisions on safeguarding the “historical truth” and establishing a single framework for education hinder the republics from pursuing their identity policies.

This Working Paper argues that the amendments both adjust the earlier changes and signal new ones in the official discourse and nationalities policy.



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# RUSSIA'S NATIONALITIES POLICY BEFORE AND AFTER THE 2020 CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS

## IS THE "ETHNIC TURN" CONTINUING?

### INTRODUCTION

The constitutional amendments in 2020 introduced a variety of shifts in Russia's nationalities policy. From this perspective, the key novelties include enhancing the symbolic status of the Russian language; referring to (ethnic) Russians as the state-founding people while guaranteeing "the maintenance of ethno-cultural and linguistic diversity"; providing support for "compatriots abroad"; "safeguarding the historical truth"; and aiming to establish a single legal framework for the upbringing and education policy. Moreover, "the maintenance of civic peace and accord" (i.e. also of "inter-ethnic accord") has now been added to the presidential powers to be exercised with the assistance of the Security Council.<sup>1</sup>

This Working Paper studies the recent trends and future prospects of Russia's nationalities policy by focusing on these shifts, duly contributing to the discussion on the subject. By analyzing these amendments and the way they were discussed during the process, we show that they connect to the broader trends of Russia's nationalities policy by consolidating the ambiguity in the state strategy, but also by continuing an incremental policy change towards the assimilation of non-Russians. Currently, other legislative initiatives are being developed based on the amendments, with many new laws underway.<sup>2</sup>

The motivation for the study arises from the notion that the nationalities policy in Russia maintains several conflicting discourses in identity politics. The state leadership refers to Russian citizens as a historically multinational people, but also sustains civic nation-building rhetoric; further, the principle of the equality of peoples is maintained alongside the growing emphasis on the primacy of ethnic Russianness. Many scholars have noted that in the 2010s, an "ethnic turn" occurred in the official discourse of the nation, when along with the political and civic unity, references to Russian ethnicity, like those of the Russian language and culture,

were being incorporated. Nevertheless, the boundaries of that "ethnic" Russian nation remain undefined in the state discourse, and debated in academia.

In the following sections, we ask whether the constitutional amendments signal a structural or institutional change in Russia's strategy of diversity management. The relevance of the study is embedded in the effect that the nationalities policy trends will have on the relations between the Kremlin and the Russian regions in the future. To this end, we analyze official, public and media discourses by studying the texts of proposals presented in the State Duma proceedings and those constitutional amendments that were eventually accepted, as well as shorthand reports of the State Duma and working group sessions on the constitutional amendments.

The study focuses on the debate at the level of central government, even though, as we will discuss, one cannot fully understand the policy shift without accounting for its effects at the level of regions. However, mapping the constitutional amendments from the perspective of the central government's nationalities policy has not yet been conducted, and we see this as groundwork for further studies in the field.

### RUSSIA'S NATIONALITIES POLICY AND THE "ETHNIC TURN"

As the name suggests, a nationalities policy is a policy dealing with the question of nationalities.<sup>3</sup> A state's response to the diversity challenge can be both strategic and policy-level: a strategy aims at dealing with diversity in the long run through managing or eliminating differences between ethnic, linguistic, religious or cultural groups, while a policy covers mid-term government actions directed at harmonizing the relations between groups.

Russia's response to diversity includes not only policy per se as a course of government actions, but also a strategic response shaped via political structures, primarily ethnic federalism. Furthermore, along with

1 The new text of the Constitution with amendments 2020: <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48953/>.

2 Noble & Petrov 2021; see also proposals made at the meeting of the Presidential Council for Internationality Relations on 30 March 2021: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65252>.

3 The term "nationalities" allows policymakers to avoid the contrast between "majorities" and "minorities", or "nations" and "ethnic groups".

its core task of managing nationalities affairs, the profiled government agency was tasked throughout the post-Soviet period with additional tasks in adjacent policy areas that ranged from managing federative relations, regional policy, and migration policy, to language policy and other areas.<sup>4</sup>

Scholars have often depicted Russia's nationalities policy as vague or even non-existent.<sup>5</sup> The reason for this is that Russia's policy towards nationalities is fundamentally controversial, pursuing both the integrationist goals of promoting civic identity and thus pursuing the strategy of minimizing differences, as well as the accommodationist goal of maintaining ethno-cultural diversity, inter alia, through the recognition of the status of ethnic republics. Yet a policy can have contradictory goals as a result of a political struggle, but also as a result of a compromise. Thus, ambiguity does not necessarily signify a shortcoming in policy-making capacity but may also be a deliberate choice.<sup>6</sup>

The main challenges of diversity in Russia have fluctuated in recent decades and have directed the policies accordingly. In the early 1990s, the federal centre and some ethnic republics struggled over political power, which shaped the 1993 Russian Constitution: it remedied only some key ideas and institutions, such as ethnic federalism, while leaving many questions unresolved, like what "multinational people" means or what "status of republics" implies beyond the right to have constitutions and state languages.

Accordingly, several contradictory discourses prevailed in the state identity politics. On the one hand, there was a consistent emphasis on the country's "multinational people" (*mnogonatsional'nyi narod*). The term was included in the preamble to the 1993 Constitution and in the 1996 Conception of State Nationalities Policy. The latter advanced the new idea of national-cultural autonomy that was institutionalized by law in the same year. On the other hand, ethnic Russians continued to be portrayed as the dominant nation, the one that has the most important role in the history of the state. As Oxana Shevel points out, the perception of the Russian nation as "a collection of ethnic groups" within which ethnic Russians play a unifying role is different from the classic civic ideal of fellow citizens forming a community.<sup>7</sup>

At the beginning of the 2000s, the new state leadership made centralization of power and political stability key priorities and introduced various institutional changes to counter the risk of internal disintegration. Ethnic and religious parties were prohibited in 2001, and direct gubernatorial elections were eliminated in December 2004. The president justified the move by citing the threat of terrorism: according to Vladimir Putin, the recent tragedy in Beslan had proved that the country would need to be more unified, and having the president appoint regional leaders would be one way to guarantee cohesion.<sup>8</sup> This step signified the decline of federalism as a tool of diversity management. At the end of the decade, the name of the office of regional leaders was changed from "presidents" to "heads of republic" because "there can only be one president in the country".

The centralization of power as well as the portrayal of external threats to national unity have directed the nation-building policies of the country to this day. Since the early 2000s, the state authorities have combined patriotism and the selected interpretations of national history to strengthen the civic, statist national identity. Actual measures to strengthen national pride have included the state-funded programmes of patriotic education since 2001 and creating a new holiday to celebrate national unity on 4 November.

At the same time, the state authorities had to address the ethnic Russian nationalist groups, which were gaining in strength. After 2005, these nationalists had gathered at public events such as the Russian March, demanding, for example, a visa regime for Central Asia, and using slogans such as "Russia for Russians" and "Stop feeding the Caucasus". Gradually, they began moving from the political margins towards mainstream politics, gaining more visibility in the media. Radical nationalist groups succeeded in redirecting the public debate, and all four of Russia's major political parties incorporated nationalist stances into their programmes. By and after 2010 in particular, radical Russian nationalists provoked and contributed to violent inter-ethnic conflicts in several cities, which raised the question of the extent to which nationalist sentiments could be managed after all.

Realizing the mobilizing potential of the nationalist ideology, the Kremlin adjusted its approach in the early 2010s. The regime had faced widespread popular protests

4 See the State Programme of the Russian Federation "Implementation of the State Nationalities Policy", approved by Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation No. 1532 of 29 December 2016.

5 E.g. Verkhovsky 2014; Rutland 2010.

6 Shevel 2011.

7 Shevel 2011, 181–182.

8 "Putin položil na Konstitutsiyu. Gazety obsuzhdayut shagi prezidenta po reforme vertikalni vlasti." IQ HSE.ru, 14 September 2004, <https://iq.hse.ru/news/177727133.html>.

in 2011–2012, which led to re-directing state policies from copying or imitating Western democratic institutions towards a stricter model of electoral authoritarianism. Somewhat paradoxically at this point, the discourse on a civic nation became part of the official discourse.

As part of his presidential re-election campaign in early 2012, Putin published an essay in which he presented keeping the multinational country together as the “great mission of the Russians”.<sup>9</sup> The essay functioned as a “methodological basis” for drafting the nationalities policy in 2012. In the Strategy of State Nationalities Policy, “strengthening the all-Russian civic identity” officially became a priority, combined with “the maintenance and development of ethno-cultural diversity” as another goal. At the same time, the Strategy assigned a special role to the Russian people as a “system-forming kernel” for the Russian state.<sup>10</sup>

In post-Soviet Russia, there have been several competing projects in the field of nationalities policy. Of these, the civic nation-building project was closely connected to the overall democratization of the state in the 2000s, but to claim that it “failed” in Russia does not properly address the dynamism of the contestation. Instead, one may ask whether nation-building as a whole became overridden by the regime’s primary aim of securing its own power. In the course of the 2000s, nation-building as a political project became subordinate to the consolidation of authoritarian rule and dominated by narratives of patriotism, heroic national history, and other similar accents on Russian ethnicity in identity politics.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 confirmed the new direction of the nationalities policy, revealing the need to frame Russia as a “divided nation”.<sup>11</sup> After 2014, the official discourse became more outspoken in terms of the primacy of Russian ethnicity, which scholars interpreted as an ethnic turn<sup>12</sup> in Russia’s identity policy as part of the conservative turn. At the same time, the state authorities increased the pressure upon and control over those radical nationalist groups who opposed the government, aiming to achieve a monopoly over the nationalist claims in society. Thus, incorporating aspects of ethnic Russian nationalism into the official nationalism took place in the context

of competing nationalisms in Russian society.<sup>13</sup> Yet it is important to note that the multinationality narrative in the official discourse was retained even after the turn, which means that even the Kremlin’s ethno-national vision of the nation remains complex.

The ambiguity is perhaps better addressed by studying how discourses were reflected in practice. In the 2010s, ideational changes were shaped into institutions, such as the Presidential Council for Internationality Relations created in 2012, and the Presidential Council for the Russian Language, re-established in 2013. After a break of more than a decade, an executive agency was re-established in the form of the Federal Agency for Nationalities Affairs under the Ministry of Culture in 2015.<sup>14</sup> Policy changes included the discontinuation of the last power-sharing treaty with the Republic of Tatarstan in 2017, which removed the last treaty-based element of federalism. The following year, an amendment to the education law removed the compulsory teaching of titular languages as the state languages of the republics and recognized Russian as a native language for non-Russians as well.

As a concession in response to protests in some republics, certain measures in the sphere of language policy were taken, such as the creation of the Foundation on the Maintenance and Learning of the Native Languages of Russia.<sup>15</sup> The gubernatorial elections were reinstated in 2012, but since then, the regional governors have been able to keep their positions only if they appear loyal to the central government. Politically motivated criminal charges against the regional leaders and their dismissal have been commonplace, especially since 2017.

The 2018 revised Strategy on Nationalities Policy re-evaluated the policy goals. The new first goal now became “the strengthening of national accord”, as distinct from the fifth goal of “the harmonization of internationality (interethnic) relations”, while “strengthening the all-Russian civic identity” and “the maintenance and support of ethnic and linguistic diversity” slipped down the list (the second and fourth goals). In addition to the goals, the Strategy added the policy priorities, the first being the maintenance of the Russian language and the fifth support for “compatriots abroad”.<sup>16</sup>

9 “Velikaya missiya russkih – obyedinyat’, skrepyat’ tsivilizatsiyu.” Vladimir Putin, 2012. “Rossii: natsional’nyi vopros.” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 23 January 2012, [http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1\\_national.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html).

10 Strategy of the State Nationalities Policy of the Russian Federation until the year 2025, approved by Presidential Decree No. 1666 on 19 December 2012.

11 Laruelle 2015.

12 Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2016, 6; Teper 2016, 393.

13 Laine 2017.

14 Presidential Decree on the Federal Agency for Nationalities Affairs of the Russian Federation No. 168 of 31 March 2015, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/acts/files/0001201504010001.pdf>; see also Goode 2019.

15 Arutyunova & Zamyatin 2021.

16 Presidential Decree on the Amendments to the Strategy of the State Nationalities Policy of the Russian Federation until the year 2025 No. 703 of 6 December 2018, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/zb8ne3ZCBHvIwzUJfgKM3BH-Po7AOVG3j.pdf>.



Consistently throughout the post-Soviet period, right-wing politicians demanded that ethnic Russians should be officially recognized as “the state-founding people”. The very concept of state-founding people (*gosudarstvoobrazuyushchiy narod*) derives from imperial Russia at the turn of the 19th century, when the idea of nationalities as political entities started to develop. At the conceptual level, it was a question of nationalities or ethnic groups (*narodnost*) potentially becoming nations (*natsiya*). At the time, the idea of Russians as a state-founding nation was connected to the privileged status that they were entitled to vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in the Russian empire.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, the concept carries temporal connotations similar to those of a “*Staatsvolk*”, the “people of the state”, or the dominant nation. The contemporary supporters of the formulation, however, aim to disperse the imperial legacy by referring to the state-founding people (*narod*) instead of the nation (*natsiya*), and mentioning the peoples of the country as having equal rights.

Despite the growing prominence of ethnic Russian nationalist leaders within the establishment, the Strategy drafters rejected the demand to institutionalize ethnic Russians as state-founding people both in 2012 and in 2018 because, according to a member of the Council for Nationality Relations and former nationalities minister and main ideologue of Russia’s current nationalities policy, Valery Tishkov, such a statement would provoke “adverse consequences in the sphere of interethnic relations, not to mention contradict the Constitution”. At the same time, they defined the “all-Russian civic identity (as) grounded in ‘Russian cultural dominance’ (*russskaya kulturnaya dominanta*)”. Further, they claimed that “Russian society is united by a single cultural (civilizational) code that is based on the maintenance and development of the Russian culture and language, the historical and cultural heritage of all peoples”. The latter claim amounts to the inclusion of the civilizational view as opposed and in addition to the state-nation view.

According to the Strategy drafters, the reference to Russia both as a state-nation and as a civilization state expresses “the uncontroversial balance between the two concepts in evaluating the Russian statehood, (ethnic) Russian people and (ethnic) Russian culture of global acclaim”.<sup>18</sup> Hence, the state authorities combine “historical” multinationality in the official discourse with the idea of a civic nation, while still maintaining

a distinctive hierarchy whereby Russian ethnicity, culture, and language have a clear primacy over those of other nationalities.

An additional ambiguity is the definition of ethnic Russianness. In the field of contemporary Russian nationalism, several interpretations of the boundaries of the nation coexist, some of which suggest the inclusion of all Russian-speakers, or Eastern Slavs, or only the narrowly defined ethnic Russians residing within the Federation, with even southern republics excluded.<sup>19</sup> For the state authorities, using a narrow definition of ethnic Russianness would, of course, be impossible in the present composition of the country. Instead, they have sought to resolve the dilemma by adopting concepts of compatriots and “the Russian World” to map the mental boundaries of the Russian nation to extend beyond the borders of the Russian Federation itself.

Oxana Shevel, writing in 2011, suggested that Russia’s nation-building strategy leaned upon the “institutionalisation and legalisation” of the ambiguous interpretation of Russians as a community including Russians abroad, that is, the national “us” that was described in the 1999 Compatriots Law. The move granted policymakers a great deal of flexibility, while postponing “a resolution of the vexing contradictions associated with this process”.<sup>20</sup> With the annexation of Crimea, the emphasis on compatriots has proved powerful but risky: the official discourse on compatriots, or the Russian World, now has an inescapable connotation of irredentism.

Thus, during the 2000s, many significant policy changes took place both at the level of discourses, as well as incremental changes in institutions and practices. Following up on Shevel’s argument, we argue that while the ambiguity of both ideas and institutions has prevailed, the importance of compatriots as one dimension of the national “us” has only increased since 2014. Yet instead of being a purposeful choice of the ruling political elite, this may well be a result of the intra-elite power struggle between the proponents of non-Russian nationalisms, civic nationalism and ethnic Russian nationalism in the establishment.

17 Miller 2012, 48.

18 Tishkov 2018, 25–26; the context also includes the opposition of “nation-state” vs “state-nation”.

19 Shevel 2011; Laruelle 2019.

20 Shevel 2011, 199.

## CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT PROCESS OF 2020 AND NATIONALITIES POLICY

The constitutional amendments of 2020 should be analyzed, first and foremost, in the context of the stricter form of authoritarian rule that the Russian political elite had turned to during the previous decade. By Putin's fourth presidential term, the successor issue had become acute: the 1993 Constitution did not allow any president to remain in power after two consecutive terms. The amendments suggested by Putin himself in January did not directly deal with this issue, but the suggestion to "nullify" Putin's presidential terms came after that from State Duma member and former cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the most important aim of the constitutional process was to enable the current political regime to secure a transfer of power. The first set of amendments were proposed by Putin himself, after which he signed an order to create a working group to discuss these changes and suggest further edits, and finally to draft the amendments into a law.<sup>22</sup> The 75 members of the working group were also approved by the president.<sup>23</sup> The draft law was then stated in its explanatory note to have been prepared on the basis of proposals submitted by the working group. Hence, the very design of the constitutional process ensured that certain views were represented while others were not. For example, some key figures who had been actively debating the views of the nation were absent from the working group.<sup>24</sup>

As Paul Goode notes, the amendments proposed by the president were not really touched on in this process, and nor were they subjected to public criticism.<sup>25</sup> Even if the constitutional process was clearly an autocratic enterprise, the state leadership wanted the amendments to appear to be accepted by the Russian population. The State Duma, the Federation Council, as well as the Constitutional Court had all accepted the amendments by mid-March, but because of the improvised "all-Russian voting", the process stretched into the summer months. After the week-long voting period, the turnout was 68% with 78% supporting the amendments package, resulting in the amendments bill coming into force on 4 July.

The constitutional amendments also touched upon the power relations between the political centre and

the regions, but we limit our analysis to identity politics themes. These included amendments restricting regional governments' autonomy, duly consolidating a general trend of the further de facto centralization of power in the letter of Russia's highest law.<sup>26</sup> In practice, further limitations to the republics' political power mean that they will have fewer means of cultivating cultural and language diversity in their respective regions. In this way, the regional governments' role is crucial in the future developments of the nationalities policy.

### Enhancing the status of the Russian language and guaranteeing the maintenance of diversity

Most of the ideological amendments to the Constitution were included in Chapter 3, under the heading of Federal Structure. From the perspective of the nationalities policy, Article 68.1 is particularly interesting as it defines – for the first time – the Russian language as the language of (ethnic) Russians, who are described as the state-founding people:

Article 68.1, addition in **bold**

“The state language of the Russian Federation on the whole territory is the Russian language **as the language of a state-founding people, which is a member of the multinational union of equal-in-rights peoples of the Russian Federation.**”<sup>27</sup>

Since Soviet times, the principle of equality of all peoples was characterized by the equality of their languages. Thus, the USSR had no official languages, and Russian was not designated the official language of the USSR until 1990. In the process of the USSR's disintegration, Russia was the last union republic to establish its state language in the October 1991 language law, after the autonomous republics had already declared their state languages in their sovereignty declarations. While the republics typically established their titular language and Russian as their state languages in their constitutions, the Russian Constitution established Russian as the state language of the whole country, recognizing in retrospect the republics' right to have state languages. The “state language” concept remained undefined, but was typically interpreted as combining

21 Noble & Petrov 2021, 139.

22 Teague 2020, 305.

23 Members of the working group listed e.g. here: <https://tass.ru/politika/7533369>.

24 Malinova 2021, 29, 32.

25 Goode 2021, 122.

26 Teague 2020, 314–316; see also Noble & Petrov 2021, 146.

27 Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation of 3 July 2020 No 445 'On the Official Publication of the Constitution with Amendments', see: [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_356419/](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_356419/); the legislative process of the draft at <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/885214-7>.



the symbolic function of a national language and the practical function of an official language.

Yet ethnic Russian nationalist members of the establishment were not satisfied with the status of Russian as a common language for all citizens and also demanded the recognition of its status as “a native language” and “ethnic language”, that is, a language associated with an ethnic group, the ethnic Russians in this case. Yet due to assimilation processes many (about a fourth in 1989) non-Russians, primarily Ukrainians and Belarusians in Russia, claim Russian as their native language and are referred to as Russian-speakers.

Similarly to the way in which “person from space” Valentina Tereshkova proposed a reset of presidential term counting, it was symbolically important that the proposal to enhance the status of the Russian language came from a non-Russian member of the working group. An ethnic Ukrainian, Bogdan Bezpalko, a member of the Presidential Council for Internationality Relations and head of the federal National-Cultural Autonomy of the Ukrainians of Russia, advocated “the right to irredentism” and the reunification of the Russian World, that is, of Ukraine and Belarus with Russia. He also suggested introducing the status of “republican languages” instead of the state languages of republics.<sup>28</sup>

Language has its own implications: if Russian is the language of the state-founding people, who are represented as divided, then support for the language also implies support for compatriots as Russian-speakers, and contributes to the irredentist vision of the nation. In fact, language becomes the lowest common denominator of various nation-building projects.<sup>29</sup> Predictably, this link between the new language status and support for “compatriots abroad” was also voiced during the constitutional amendment process.<sup>30</sup>

At the working group session, Putin supported the amendment. In response to the concerns expressed by a working group member from Tatarstan about its possible adverse effects on other languages, the president counterbalanced it with another amendment that guarantees the maintenance of ethnocultural and linguistic diversity.<sup>31</sup> However, the inclusion of this provision does not actually add anything new in the legal sense regarding languages to the previously existing Article 68.3.

Article 69.2, new paragraph added

“The state protects the cultural originality (distinctiveness) of all people and ethnic entities (communities) of the Russian Federation; guarantees the maintenance of ethnocultural and linguistic diversity.”

Further, the inclusion of the provision on “the language of a state-founding people” is not merely a symbolic affirmation of the (ethnic) Russian people, but also enhancing the status of Russian as “an ethnic language”. This is a continuation to the 2018 education law amendment that removed the compulsory teaching of the state language of republics and included the new status of Russian as “a native language”, also of non-Russians.<sup>32</sup>

### Discourses on nation

Article 68.1, in its amended form, confirms the key idea of the Russian nationalities policy, which had, thus far, been restricted to implicit formulations – namely the (ethnic) Russians’ special role. In this way, the amendment institutionalizes one of the internal contradictions of the Russian nationalities policy after 2012: it acknowledges the special role of ethnic Russians as *Staatsvolk*, while maintaining the principle of the equality and self-determination of peoples (Art. 5.3). The formulation, in this way, portrays Russians as *primus inter pares*. Moreover, in the context of policy practices regarding language rights in the 2010s, for example, it is rather clear that the former statement has recently been more important for the policymakers than the latter. Putin mentioned multinationality at the first session of the working group.<sup>33</sup>

During the constitutional process, amending the preamble to the Constitution – that begins with “We, the multinational people” – so that it would include a direct reference to ethnic Russians (*russkie*) was also proposed, but these suggestions were rejected.<sup>34</sup> Yet the wording in Article 68.1 could be seen as a partial concession to those actors who had long deemed the wording of the preamble to be vague.<sup>35</sup> As mentioned above, the

28 See the shorthand report of the working group session on 13 February 2020: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62776>.

29 Zamyatin 2018, 61–62.

30 See the speech by Lyudmila Dudova, chair of the Association of the Teachers of Literature and the Russian Language, in the shorthand report of the working group session on 3 July 2020: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63599>.

31 Concerns voiced by the speaker of Tatarstan’s State Council, Farid Mukhametshin, see: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4269834>.

32 See page 10 below; see also Arutyunova & Zamyatin 2021.

33 See the shorthand report of the first session on 16 January 2020: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62592>.

34 During the constitutional process, State Duma deputy Konstantin Zatulin, LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovskii, and the regional assembly of Moscow oblast suggested amending the preamble. See Goode 2021, 18.

35 Previously, the former nationalities minister, Vyacheslav Mikhailov, had criticized the wording. “Ni odna strana ne mozhet bez ideologii.” Interv’iu s avtorom idei uzakonit’ rossiiskuiu natsiiu”. republic.ru, 2 November 2018, <https://republic.ru/posts/75657>.

2018 revision of the Strategy of Nationalities Policy was an attempt to achieve uniformity inter alia by providing definitions for the nation. The text of the document now defines “the multinational people of the Russian Federation” as “a community of free equal citizens of the Russian Federation of various ethnic, religious, social and other affiliations, with civic consciousness (*obladayushchih grazhdanskim samosoznaniem*)”.<sup>36</sup>

Here, too, the conceptual choice of “equal rights” should be contextualized. Even though the wording appears to promote a civic model whereby citizenship grants membership of the nation regardless of the individual’s background, other sources provide evidence that in the perception of the state authorities, the Russian identity is *more* than that. The emphasis on equal rights in legislative or even constitutional language needs to be analyzed in the context of practical and institutional changes and, when doing so, it appears baseless. Moreover, in framing ethnic Russians as the state-founding people, the Constitution now clearly treats Russia’s nationalities differently at an institutional level.

In addition to (indirectly) elevating ethnic Russians as a state-founding people, the new Constitution now confirms the role of compatriots as part of Russian identity:

Article 69.3, new paragraph added
“The Russian Federation provides support to compatriots living abroad in the exercise of their rights, ensuring the protection of their interests and the preservation of the all-Russia cultural identity.”

Since the 1999 law on compatriots, several official documents have addressed the issue of Russians living abroad with this concept. Protecting their rights was included in the Strategy of National Security in 2015, which also mentions the importance of the Russian language for compatriots.<sup>37</sup> In the foreign policy context, and after 2014 in particular, Russia’s eagerness to protect the rights of compatriots has acquired an imperial, even irredentist, tone. At the same time, the language and cultural ties are upheld with state institutions such as the Russian World Foundation and *Rossotrudnichestvo*, founded in 2007 and 2008

respectively. The organizations enjoy state funding and work to promote the Russian language, culture and “values” abroad. In the Russian nationalist discourse, the lowest common denominator for defining compatriots abroad is the Russian language.<sup>38</sup> However, even though the imperial version of Russian nationalism envisages compatriots as part of the Russian nation, it should be noted that this discourse deliberately overlooks the diversity within, and agency of, the Russian diaspora itself.

Thus, the discourse on compatriots as a component of Russian national identity, or the perception of them as the “Russian nation extended”, is not novel as such, but mentioning them in the Constitution in this manner could amount to a policy shift. The idea of compatriots as well as one of its official pronouncements, the Russian World, remains central to the official nationalist discourse.<sup>39</sup> In fact, in June 2021, the Russian nationalists within the establishment proposed a draft bill to the State Duma, claiming the right to repatriate for the compatriots.<sup>40</sup> By doing this they also continue the struggle to explicitly define “the state-founding people” who according to their draft bill are (ethnic) Russians.<sup>41</sup>

### National identity, education, and memory politics

The promotion of civic identity has long been understood as a matter of education. Just like the patriotic education programmes, shaped and funded by the state since 2001, fostering a strong national identity is connected with the idea of educating, informing and protecting young people. The constitutional amendments addressed this theme by establishing a single framework for education, as well as by safeguarding “the historical truth”. By summer 2021, these amendments had already inspired other legislative changes.

Even well before the constitutional process of 2020, the state authorities had worked towards unification of education, for example in the sphere of language. This aim has developed in the context of divergent practices in the field: since the early 1990s, some republics

36 Strategy of the State Nationalities Policy 2018, p. 6.  
 37 “O Strategii natsional’noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii”. Rossiiskaya gazeta, 31 December 2015, <https://rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>, Articles II/8 and III/81.

38 Zamyatin 2018.  
 39 Mikhail Suslov describes the Russian World as developing into an “all-embracing ideology”, which suggests that Russia is or should be politically and geographically bigger than the present-day Russian Federation. Suslov, Mikhail 2018, 330.  
 40 The draft bill proposed by Konstantin Zatulin: <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/1191989-7?fbclid=IwAR2bTCKR0L5zelJ5tg84yPLqC-kJnkL8fl-YpCBGMJzH4OnQrySJ0LAHLQFg>.  
 41 In addition to the ethnic Russians as the state-founding people, the draft lists separately “the representatives of the Belarusian and Ukrainian peoples associated with the state-founding people by a common historical fate and culture” and other categories of peoples as “the peoples historically living on the territory of the Russian Federation”. At the time of writing, it is still unclear whether the bill will proceed.

had provided native language instruction for the titular schoolchildren, while other republics introduced the state language of the republic as a compulsory subject for all schoolchildren irrespective of their ethnicity. According to the Russian and republican legislation, native languages and literatures, national history and some other subjects were taught as part of the national-regional component of the main educational programmes, which allowed the republics to pursue their identity policies.

In the 2000s, the Russian authorities initiated an education reform that, inter alia, removed the national-regional component. The reform was justified by the need “to overcome ‘the negative tendencies’ caused by the transformation of an educational institution intended to implement the educational programmes with a national-regional component and with instruction in the native (non-Russian) and the Russian (non-native) languages, into a tool of ethnic mobilization used to transform federal relations into confederative ones”.<sup>42</sup>

As a compromise, the teaching of state languages and native languages continued for the time being, albeit in reduced volumes. The discourse against the compulsory teaching of the state languages of republics became more vocal in the 2010s, however. In 2017, Vladimir Putin announced at the session of the Council for Internationality Relations that “forcing a person to learn a language that is not his/her native language is impermissible”. The compulsory teaching of the state languages of republics was duly removed. According to the amended education law, parents have to present a written demand for native language teaching. Notably, both ethnic Russian and non-Russian parents can now choose Russian as the native language of their children.<sup>43</sup>

The constitutional amendment to Article 71 introduces a single legal framework for the upbringing and education system under the competence of the central state and, thus, finally prevents the republics from pursuing their identity policies (while in other policy areas the norm envisages only the “establishment of the principles of federal policy” and, therefore, also legitimizes regional policies). The separate inclusion of upbringing signifies a return to the Soviet tradition, but emphasizes the transmission of “spiritual-moral values”, “the feeling of patriotism”, “deference towards the memory of the Fatherland’s protectors”, and “the cultural heritage and traditions of the multinational people” of Russia.

42 Conception of the State National Educational Policy of the Russian Federation of 3 August 2006.

43 Arutyunova & Zamyatin 2021.

Article 71 e), addition in **bold**

“Pursuant to the Law, the following items shall be added to the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation: e) establishment of the principles of federal policy and federal programmes in the sphere of state, economic, ecological, **scientific-technical**, social, cultural and national development of the Russian Federation; **establishment of single legal frameworks for the healthcare system and the upbringing and education system, including lifelong learning.**”

In July 2020, the law on education was amended by including upbringing programmes. Subsequently, in April 2021 the amendment to the education law on the newly introduced “enlightenment activities” (*prosvetitel’skaya deyatel’nost’*) that are pursued outside the system of formal education was passed, according to its explanatory note, in order to “shield students from anti-Russian propaganda”.<sup>44</sup> These activities are defined very broadly and can be interpreted to censor out any unwanted public activity, which could “incite social, racial, national or religious discord, including when communicating false information about historical, national, religious and cultural traditions to students, as well as to encourage actions contrary to the Constitution”. It is still too early to say how the law will be applied in practice after coming into force in June 2021, but the vague definition allows it to be used in a highly selective manner.

During the 2010s, the state authorities became increasingly interested in using Russia’s “thousand-year-long” history as a part of identity politics and patriotic upbringing in particular. The Kremlin’s view on the matter is selective and authoritarian, as it has reserved for itself the role of interpreting the past and safeguarding the “correct” representations of history in society. In line with other discursive changes regarding the nation in the 2010s, the Kremlin has stressed the role of shared history in fostering national unity.<sup>45</sup> In the field of education, there have been plans to introduce a single history textbook, as well as to make a unified history exam compulsory for all Russian students. Neither of the plans has been realized exactly as anticipated but nor have they been abandoned, and the state authorities’ aim to canonize history is clear.<sup>46</sup>

44 Federal Law On the Amendments to the Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” Regarding the Issues of Upbringing of Learners No 85 of 5 April 2021: entered into force on 1 June.

45 Laine 2020.

46 Suslov, Andrei 2018.

In the constitutional process of 2020, a new Article 67' was added. The first paragraph 67'.1 defines the Russian Federation as the successor state of the USSR. The following paragraphs 67'.2 and 67'.3 further define the role of history in identity politics:

Article 67', new paragraphs added

67'.2 “The Russian Federation, being united by the millennial history, safeguarding the memory of ancestors who transferred the ideals and the belief in God to us as well as continuity in the development of the Russian State, recognizes the historically constructed state unity.”

67'.3 “(It is proclaimed that) the Russian Federation honours the feat of the defenders of the Fatherland and safeguards the historical truth. Denigrating the feat of the people who defended the Fatherland shall not be permitted.”

The reference to God in the constitution sparked some criticism in the Russian media for contradicting the constitutional statement on the separation of State and Church, and for implicitly excluding non-religious people from the idea of the nation.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the statements on the secularity of the Russian state (Article 14) as well as citizens' freedom of religion (Article 28) remained untouched during the constitutional process of 2020. The Constitutional Court declared that the added paragraph does not undermine these statements because it is not connected to any particular confessions, and does not proclaim religious conviction as obligatory or discriminate against Russian citizens on the grounds of their beliefs.<sup>48</sup> Despite these explanations, the addition clearly creates a logical discrepancy between different parts of the Constitution.

History politics was already institutionalized in several state-funded and state-supported projects, in organizations, as well as in legislation before the constitutional process, but some new initiatives were taken in late 2020 as well. Deputy Chair of the State Duma Irina Yarovaya made a proposal to criminalize “spreading false information” on the internet about the USSR during the war, and the law came into force

in April 2021.<sup>49</sup> A direct causality cannot be proved, even though the wording of Yarovaya's bill reflects the idea of not permitting the denigration of the feat of the defenders of the Fatherland, mentioned in paragraph 67'.3. In our reading, it is possible that the constitutional amendments have inspired loyal politicians to advance similar bills (duly gaining political currency as they could safely assume that these proposals would be welcomed by the president).

The constitutional amendments as well as the recent changes to the law on education, together with the legislation regulating the “correct” way of addressing the past, have consolidated the main lines of the Kremlin's identity politics. The “all-Russian” identity of the people is fostered through memory politics and patriotism, while the space for the republics' own policies on these matters is now fundamentally limited.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The constitutional amendment process of 2020 opened a window of opportunity for different actors to pursue their visions of national identity and resulted in another, albeit relative, victory for those in the establishment who want to advance the ethnic Russian nationalist agenda. Their win was enabled by the constitutional process itself because members of the working group with alternative views remained underrepresented. The amendments are bound to shape Russian politics in a fundamental way for years to come.

Regarding the nationalities policy, significant projects are still to be expected and many of them have language at their core: in March 2021, at the meeting of the Council for Internationality Relations, President Putin mentioned among other things that the government is already working on the new concept on state language policy.<sup>50</sup> The Council on the Russian Language develops further measures towards the promotion of the Russian language in the country and abroad.

Even at this point, however, it can be said that the aforementioned constitutional amendments embody the ideas that have been only partially present in the official discourses before, but that have now been institutionalized. In our interpretation, the changes in

47 “Popravka ob upominanii boga v Konstitutsii odobrena Gosdumoi”, Interfax, 10 March 2020, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/698397>.

48 Zaklyuchenie Konstitutsionnogo Suda Rossiiskoy Federatsii, Rossiyskaya gazeta, 17 March 2020: <https://rg.ru/2020/03/17/ks-rf-popravki-dok.html>.

49 Originally, the idea came from a Duma cultural committee member, and after the president's public endorsement, Yarovaya made her proposal. See e.g. <https://ria.ru/20201027/putin-1581807300.html>; <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/1050812-7>.

50 Session of the Presidential Council for Internationality Relations. kremlin.ru, 30 March 2021: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65252>.



the Constitution are both a link in a continuum of incremental policy change and a remarkable policy shift, having now been introduced both at the discursive and institutional levels.

First, the amendments signify a break with the previous balance in the official discourse sustained hitherto, firstly in the 2018 revised Strategy of Nationalities Policy. Foremost, the new provisions make the ethnification trend explicit at the discursive level: the concept “state-founding people” is new to the Constitution and describes the nation in ethnic or linguistic terms. However, the recognition of the dominant status of one “people” contradicts the original constitutional provisions and the principle of “the equality of peoples” in particular. The clauses on this people being “a member of the multinational union of equal-in-rights peoples” and on “the maintenance of ethnocultural and linguistic diversity” mitigate this profound shift by adding some ambiguity. Another sign of ethnification is the absence of any mention in the amended Constitution of a “civic nation”. Instead, an “all-Russian civic identity” is projected abroad via support for compatriots. The changing balance of discourses would lead to a shift in the heavy point of nation-building away from a civic vision towards an ethnic vision of nation-to-be-built.

Second, the amendments change not only official discourse but also the institutional setting for the nationalities policy in its core task of dealing with non-Russians. Assigning the establishment of a single framework for the education system to the competence of the centre prevented the republics from pursuing their own identity policies. The interventions in education politics and memory politics suggest that new assimilationist measures will be translated into instrumental policy, first of all in the field of language policy. Now, non-Russians are expected to know Russian and the unstated implication is that they should know it at the native level. The recognition of the new status of the Russian language and its speakers as well as the changing role of history and education continue the process of forcing out other languages and identities from the public sphere.

Hence, the revised Constitution shifts the balance in the official identity discourse and the instrumental policy but does not resolve the ambiguities in the nationalities policy, which maintains the strategy of pursuing several goals simultaneously. Based on the analysis, we suggest that strategic planning and the power struggle

are not separate processes but highlight two sides of the policymaking process. Moreover, if we agree that a system of informal networks is a part of Russia’s policymaking,<sup>51</sup> the question remains: Who are the key actors steering the nationalities policies and what kind of interaction takes place between them? Instead of merely labelling the current nationalities policy line as “strategic ambiguity”, we should further analyze when ambiguity results from a compromise or a deadlock in the power struggle, and when it is used strategically and is sustained by consensus. At this point, we suggest that the analytical framework proposed by Russia-watchers, according to which the president gives general guidelines, and after which other policymakers creatively develop them incorporating their own interests and visions, is also applicable to the context of the nationalities policy.

Russia’s constitutional amendments of 2020 attracted considerable media and scholarly attention. A critical question stemming from the whole process would be what role, exactly, the Constitution plays in a country that is known for its “rule by law” as opposed to the “rule of law”. Even before the amendments of 2020, the spirit of the 1993 Constitution was in direct conflict with many new laws passed during the 2000s. Moreover, as a whole, it did not reflect the political reality of the country; for example, from the mid-2000s Russia has de facto functioned not as a federation but as a unitary state, and the secularity of the state has been undermined by the increasingly important role of the Russian Orthodox Church in politics. Since the adoption of the amendments in 2020, the Constitution is an internally inconsistent document that still fails to reflect the political reality in the country.

In the sphere of the nationalities policy, the constitutional amendments institutionalized official identity discourses at the level of fundamental principles and norms enshrined in the basic law of the country. They also set the direction for further changes by paving the way for new laws, the passing of which the state authorities can advocate by arguing that the legislative environment needs to be congruent with the amended Constitution and, moreover, that this “harmonization” – on the basis of the all-Russian voting – is about realizing the popular will. The securitization context for “the maintenance of civic peace and accord” gives a hint about the direction that these further changes are likely to take. /

51 Ledeneva 2013.

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