
Born to Be Different

National Identity And The “Other” In Russian Political Elite Discourse

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In his presidential address to the Valdai International Discussion Club on September 20, 2013, Russian President Vladimir Putin transformed national identity into the primary political concern for Russian elites: “Today we need new strategies to preserve our identity in a rapidly changing world. [...] For us, questions about who we are and who we want to be are increasingly prominent in our society. [...] It is evident that it is impossible to move forward without spiritual, cultural and national self-determination.”²⁸¹ Putin’s speech activated a discourse within the Russian political elite concerned with who Russians are and who they are not. Previously fraternal ethnicities were categorized into the increasingly diverse and expanding label of “other”; defining Russian national identity much more narrowly than ever before.

The recent redefinition of Russian national identity is puzzling. It remains unclear why Russia changed its attitudes towards neighboring ethnic groups and nation-states, as well as its own population. The latest transformations in national identity are particularly perplexing if you consider that ethnic Russians share many congenital and gained characteristics with the aforementioned groups as well as a controversial history of interrelations. Russian national identity was not actively discussed on an official level until recently.

²⁸¹ Vladimir Putin, *Three Landmark Speeches by the President of Russia* (Kuala Lumpur: ITBM, 2014), 28.

In this paper I address the question of the origins of modern Russian national identity by focusing on the discursive power of elites. More specifically, I argue that the observed change in attitudes and definitions can be explained by the deliberate manipulations of political elites, who employ their discursive power to achieve their own economic and political goals. Elites are believed to have social power over other groups of the society; they can frame discourses within the society by limiting the general public’s freedom of action through mental control.²⁸² Thus, the primary focus of my research is the influence of elite interests in Russian political discourse, more specifically, how did the Russian elites’ political discourse influence Russian national identity and the notion of the “other?”

The paper focuses on the formulation of national identity in Russian elite political discourse in the period of Vladimir Putin’s incumbency.²⁸³ The Russian government is conventionally characterized by centralized, personalized power structures, which effectively resist any manifestation of opposition.²⁸⁴ More importantly, the personalization of power in Russia is also accompanied by the rise of nationalism, which is often claimed to be popularized by Vladimir Putin.²⁸⁵ These considerations lead to the

²⁸² Teun Van Dijk (1989) “Structures of discourse and structures of power,” in *Communication Yearbook 12*, ed. James A. Anderson (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), 19.

²⁸³ Particular attention is paid to the president due to the high level of personalization of state power in Russia. For details, see Lilia Shevtsova, “The Return of Personalized Power,” *Journal of Democracy* 20, 2 (2009), 61–65.

²⁸⁴ Dorothy Horsfield, “Casting shadows? Authoritarianism in Putin’s Russia,” *Asia Europe Journal*, 12, 4 (2014), 445-456.

²⁸⁵ Uri Teper and Daniel Course, “Contesting Putin’s nation-building: the ‘Muslim other’ and the challenge of the Russian ethno-cultural alternative,” *Nations & Nationalism*, 20, 4,

conclusion that the Russian elites' message must be characterized by a high level of homogeneity and consistency, thereby justifying a study of the elites' influence on the Russian national identity and notions of the "other," referring to the West and non-ethnic Russians.

The remainder of the paper is organized in the following way. First, I discuss the theoretical ramifications of national identity research, then analyze primordial and constructivist approaches. I proceed to the analysis of Russia by first discussing its state ideology and its influences on the perception of the West as the "other." The next section focuses on the formulation of national identity within the domestic political discourse and the conceptualization of the non-ethnic Russian "other." Finally, I conclude that there are two coexisting notions of the "other".

APPROACHES TO NATIONAL IDENTITY

There are two major theoretical approaches to national identity. An analysis of both will make it possible to draw conclusions about the ability of elites to create the discourse of otherness. The first, primordialism, argues that identity is intrinsic and static. Ethnicity is biologically and historically given, meaning that an individual is born with a certain ethnic identity, which he/she cannot alter. According to the second approach, constructivism, identity is manipulative and ever changing; it is based on political, social and cultural resources. Thus, ethnicity is socially constructed and can be manipulated by outside forces to create

(2014), 721-741; Sean Cannady and Paul Kubicek, "Nationalism and legitimation for authoritarianism: A comparison of Nicholas I and Vladimir Putin," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 5, 1, (2014), 1-9; Theodore P. Gerber, "Beyond Putin? Nationalism and Xenophobia in Russian Public Opinion," *Washington Quarterly*, 37, 3 (2014), 113-134.

antagonism against other ethnicities.²⁸⁶ In this paper I argue that national identity is both given and constructed. This equivocal nature of national identity allows the political elites to manipulate it in accordance with their material and instrumental interests.

The fact that national identity is both primordial and instrumental makes it Janus-faced. People are limited in their self-identification by their heritage, communities, and environment. From this point of view, identity is given. However, individuals are also free to alter their identities, depending on both the judgments of others and the consideration of comforts or benefits desired from other identities. Thus, identity is also constructed.²⁸⁷

I apply this notion of Janus-faced national identity to analyze the discursive identity formation by Russian elites.²⁸⁸ In one consideration, the Russian political elites cannot avoid the given characteristics of Russian identity, which is limited to Slavic genetic heritage, Orthodox Christian religion, and a long history of authoritarian power relations. In another consideration, Russian identity is adjusted depending on countless domestic and international factors, namely neighbouring states, the economic and strategic interests of the ruling party, ongoing domestic and international conflicts, and survival-related interests of the elites. Inborn traits of Russians can therefore be easily employed for construction of the national identity in accordance with the current needs. Thus, this paper is aimed at revealing the interplay of the given and constructed

²⁸⁶ Andrzej Walicki, (1998) 'Ernest Gellner and the "Constructivist" Theory of Nation', *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 22, Cultures and Nations of Central and Eastern Europe (1998), 611-619

²⁸⁷ David Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Population in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 20-21.

²⁸⁸ *Ivi.*

characteristics of Russian identity and how it is influenced by elite discourse.

CIVILIZATIONAL NATIONALISM AND THE WEST AS THE “OTHER”

Recently Russian state ideology, the core of the political elite’s discourse, has gained features of a so-called civilizational nationalism. This civilizational nationalism takes its roots from the 19th century idea of a non-Western path, which argues the Russian highly centralized non-democratic political system is caused by civilizational predetermination.²⁸⁹ The Kremlin made a deliberate choice to canonize the notion of a thousand-year-old civilization to replace the old doctrines of Marxist-Leninist ideologies and to block the allegedly hostile Western liberal and democratic penetration into Russia. According to academics Aleksandr Verkhovskii and Emil Pain, civilizational nationalism predisposes Russia to an authoritarian regime.²⁹⁰ More importantly, a positive attitude to civilizational nationalism is shared by multiple groups within the society, including the strong-arm branch of the political elites, liberal thinkers, the political establishment, and the mass public.

Discussing civilizational nationalism within the Russian official discourse is impossible without the concept of sovereign democracy, as opposed to the Western liberal democracy. According to academic Thomas Ambrosio, sovereign democracy “expresses Russian independence on the world stage and reject[s] the legitimacy of external criticisms from the democratic West.”²⁹¹ Political elites

use the concept of sovereign democracy to popularize the idea of the non-Western “special path” within the country and the necessity to counterbalance hostile developments abroad. This process has a direct influence on the Russian ideological framing of the “us and them” division. Sovereign democracy allows the political elites to emphasize the diversity of values, differentiating between Western neo-imperialism and the Russian tradition of strong statehood.²⁹²

An important component of Russian state ideology is the notion of a Russia-centered world as an alternative to the notion of the West as the world’s center.²⁹³ Usually, the notion of a Russia-centered world is articulated in opposition to the EU-centered world and is connected to international political, economic, and social processes taking place in the post-Soviet space. Russia is juxtaposed to Europe, as a bearer of more advanced values and norms. In his address to the Federal Assembly in 2013, Vladimir Putin said: “Today in many countries the norms of morality and ethics are reviewed, national traditions and cultures are erased. They [the West] demand [...] the obligatory recognition of equivalence of good and evil [...]. Russia will keep to traditional values.”²⁹⁴ Thus, Putin constructs the discourse as focused on preserving traditional values and capable of making an effective distinction between good and evil. Logically, the preservation of traditional values depends on their holders,

²⁸⁹ Aleksandr Verkhovskii and Emil Pain, “Civilizational Nationalism. The Russian Version of the ‘Special Path,’” *Russian Politics and Law* 50, 5, (2012), 56.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁹¹ Thomas Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union*. (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 70.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 79

²⁹³ Roy Allison, “Russian ‘Deniable’ Intervention in Ukraine: How and Why Russia Broke the Rules,” *International Affairs* 90, 6 (2014), 1256.

²⁹⁴ Elizabeth Salkova, “Putin puts the traditional Russian values, as opposed to the western morality,” December 12, 2013’ *Ok-inform.ru*. <http://ok-inform.ru/politika/vlast/7459-rossiya-budet-i-dalshe-podderzhivat-traditsionnye-tsennosti.html>

“true Russians,” with distinct behaviors and characteristics from the others.

Thus, the West is the most frequently mentioned and to a certain degree institutionalized “other” within Russian elite political discourse. It is an integral part of the ideological framework of Russian politics, which is used to justify both domestic and foreign policy decisions. Nevertheless, the question remains: has Russia also transitioned to a domestically nationalist ideology, as argued by the previous research?²⁹⁵ If the basis of Russian state ideology is embedded in nationalism, we should expect to observe well-defined national identity as contrasted not only to the West, as occidentalists would assume, but also to the domestic “other,” threatening the aforementioned homogeneity of the nation.²⁹⁶ This puzzle can be solved through a detailed analysis of elite discourse in regard to ethnic and non-ethnic Russians.

NON-ETHNIC RUSSIANS AS THE “OTHER” IN THE RUSSIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

The formation of national identity and the notion of the “other” through the discursive power of political elites is an ongoing and dynamic process in the Russian Federation. Its relevance can be explained by two recent changes. First, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the proportion of the ethnic Russians in the country increased from 52 percent to

80 percent.²⁹⁷ This rapid change initiated the process of national identity revision. As the proportion of ethnic Russians increased relative to other ethnic groups, the possibility of speaking about Russians as a nation (*Russkiye*), not of Russians as a people (*Rosseyane*) emerged. Secondly, the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s was marked by the rapid decrease in birth rates among ethnic Russians and the opposite tendency amongst the Muslim population within the Russian Federation. The influx of labor migrants from the Caucasus and thus, the increase in the number of ethnic groups living side by side in large cities, translated religion and skin color into more relevant concepts in elite national identity discourse.²⁹⁸ These two factors created a demand from both the general ethnic Russian public for national, cultural, and ethnic reassertion, which the political elites proved ready to satisfy.

The clash between ethnic and non-ethnic Russians is highly problematic because the Soviet Union kindled the process of national formation within each union republic in early 1920s (so-called policy of *korenizatsiia*), thus giving birth to nationalistic inclinations.²⁹⁹ Currently, Russian elites find difficulty in criticizing Soviet policies, as the Russian Federation is considered to be the legal heir of the USSR, the collapse of which, according to Vladimir Putin, was “the greatest geopolitical

²⁹⁵ Wayne Allensworth, *The Russian Question: Nationalism, Modernization and Post-Communist Russia* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 260; Edward Lucas, E. *The New Cold War: How the Kremlin Menaces Both Russia and the West* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 14; Pierre Hassner, “Russia’s Transition to Autocracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, 19, 2 (2008), 7.

²⁹⁶ Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 4.

²⁹⁷ Luke March, “Nationalism for Export? The Domestic and Foreign-Policy Implications of the New Russian Idea,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64, 3, (2012), 404.

²⁹⁸ Agata Dubas, *The Menace of a ‘Brown’ Russia: Ethnically Motivated Xenophobia—Symptoms, Causes and Prospects for the Future* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, 2008).

²⁹⁹ Rogers Brubaker, “Rethinking Nationhood: Nation as Institutionalized Form, Practical Category, Contingent Event,” *Contention*, 4, (1994), 3-14.

tragedy of the 20th century.”³⁰⁰ The second cleavage between the West and the East is deeply rooted in the Russian civilization nationalist ideology and is mostly related to the Russian foreign policy discourse. Finally, the third cleavage addresses the conflict between ethnic identities (*Russkij*) based on religion, language, culture and the civic identity (*Rossijskij*) based on inclusive citizenship.³⁰¹ This cleavage is the most salient and important in regards to the notion of “the other” within the Russian borders.

More specific analysis of the variety of elite discourse channels reveals the cleavage between ethnic and civic identities is the most widely discussed and the most coherently presented. Marlene Laruelle found that the majority of Russian governmental TV programs emphasize the Slavic roots of the Russian identity, and mention historical, religious, and cultural links with the neighboring ethnic groups (in particular Georgians and Ukrainians), spoilt by the so-called nationalist diseases of the post-Soviet epidemic.³⁰² This approach to presenting the interethnic relations reveals the dichotomy of Russian political discourse. “Others” are perceived to be the same in primordial terms; however, they are criticized for developing into something different, as a result of the latest political decisions of the titular elites. In

³⁰⁰ Katie Sanders, “Did Vladimir Putin call the breakup of the USSR ‘the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century?’” *Pundit Fact*, March 6, 2014
<http://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2014/mar/06/john-bolton/did-vladimir-putin-call-breakup-ussr-greatest-geop/>

³⁰¹ Vera Tolz, “Forging the Nation: National Identity and Nation Building in Post-Communist Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 50, 6 (1998), 993-1022.

³⁰² Marlene Laruelle, “The Russian Idea on the Small Screen: Staging National Identity of the Russian TV,” *Demokratizatsiya* 22, 2 (2014), 329-330.

such a way, neighboring ethnic groups are presented as the same historically, but different currently.

A similar approach is applied to the North Caucasus, which is officially located within the Russian borders. The Caucasians belong to a variety of ethnic groups, and thus, it is difficult to use primordial similarities in this case. However, an analysis of state-sponsored TV programs demonstrates that the North Caucasus is portrayed as having a different, forgotten identity: the Cossack one.³⁰³ North Caucasus is depicted as the place of great wars of Slavic Cossacks, a narrative that makes this region one more bastion of Pan-Russian context, in which the North Caucasian people are assigned a secondary role. Thus, even if the given identities are inapplicable, they are used for constructivist purposes.

The annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine activated the Russian elites’ nationalist discourse and brought forth valuable data for analysis. The President’s governmental speeches and announcements, and those of other officials, regarding the dispute in Ukraine show that Russian elites prefer to describe national identity in primordial ethno-linguistic and ethno-cultural terms. These terms reassert the boundaries between Russians and the other (in this case Ukrainians) as a justification for Russian territorial claims.³⁰⁴ In his Kremlin address on the unification with Crimea, Putin used the word ‘*Russkij*’ 29 times, thus initiating the official transfer of the Russian elite political discourse from civic identity to ethnic identity.³⁰⁵ Taking into consideration the aforementioned discussion of the *Russkij* and

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ Uri Teper, “Official Russian Identity Discourse In Light of the Annexation of Crimea: National or Imperial?,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* (2015), 2.

³⁰⁵ Vladimir Putin, “Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii,” 2014 [Address of the President of the Russian Federation]. *Kremlin.ru*, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>>

Rossijskij dichotomy in the Russian political discourse, it can be concluded that Russia's geostrategic interests resulted in the ethnicization of the Russian national identity and the notion of the "other."

Russian elites have proved to be extremely opportunistic.³⁰⁶ Foreign and domestic policy considerations provided the elites with justification to transform once fraternal ethnic groups into the threatening "other".³⁰⁷ More importantly, this "other" exists both within and beyond the Russian borders, ensuring that the Russian national identity as it is currently presented in the Russian political discourse, can exist only as long as it is strictly framed within its ethnic boundaries. In such a way, the primordial myths regarding threats to Russia as a nation, proved to be a solid and reliable basis for construction of the national identity and the "other."

CONCLUSION

Within Russian elite political discourse, national identity and the notion of the "other" are presented in primordial, ethnic terms. Elites manipulate the public's perception of the inborn characteristics of Russians in order to construct an identity capable of reasserting the status of Russia as a whole on the international arena, and the position of the current incumbents on the domestic level. Thus, Russian national identity can be characterized as both given and constructed, as it combines the inherited, stable features with those imposed and manipulated by the political elites.

³⁰⁶ Galina Kozhevnikova, G. (2004) "Putin'skii prizyv": ideology ili mifotvortsy?", in *Putiami nesvobody* [By Paths of Bondage], ed. Aleksandr Verkhovskii (Moscow: Information-Analytical Center 'SOVA', 2005), 6-17.

³⁰⁷ Vera Tolz, Vera, "Rethinking Russian-Ukrainian relations: A New Trend in Nation-building in Post-communist Russia?" *Nations and Nationalism*, 8, 2 (2002), 235-253.

Two dimensions of Russian national identity can be traced: (1) Russians as contrasted with the West, and (2) ethnic Russians (*Russkiye*) as contrasted with non-ethnic Russians or fraternal ethnic groups "spoiled" by the West. The first dimension aims to reassure Russia's status as a great power, destined to be different from the West, on an international level. The second dimension ensures the political survival of the ruling party, since its main goal is to show the otherness of the minorities within Russia and to justify the expansion of Russia beyond its borders. Combined, these two notions of the "other" serve both foreign and domestic objectives of the Russian elites.