THE PROBLEMS OF TAKING NATIONALIST RHETORIC AT FACE VALUE

A great deal of attention was paid to Putin’s rhetoric after the annexation of Crimea and as the situation continued to deteriorate in eastern Ukraine. The nationalist rhetoric sparked fears that ethnic nationalism and irredentism were driving Russian foreign policy. However, I argue that politicians instrumentally use nationalist narratives and rhetoric because they resonate with the general population, but that rhetoric should not be taken at face value because it does not give a complete picture of how decisions are made and policy is formulated.

In requesting admission for Crimea into the Russian Federation, Putin told the Duma how “everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride” and “in people’s hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia.”¹ He declared Russia would always defend the millions of Russians and Russian-speakers in Ukraine and appealed to Germany, a country once divided, to support the historic aspirations of the Russian World to reestablish unity. During a nationally televised question-and-answer session, Putin spoke of the importance of ensuring “the rights and interests of Russians and Russian-speaking citizens in south-east Ukraine.”² He mentioned the “historical term” for the region, Novorossiya, and how “only God knew why” the region had been transferred to Ukraine in the 1920s. And at the end of the year, in his annual address, Putin said that Crimea has “invaluable civilizational and even sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.”³

But despite interpretations of the rhetoric as a turn towards ethnic nationalism and irredentism, I argue that the use of the nationalistic rhetoric was strategic. I put forward three reasons why it is highly unlikely that it was nationalism, especially ethnic nationalism, that was driving decision and policy making. The first reason is that the influence of nationalists on policy-making in Russia is negligible. The second reason is that Putin’s rhetoric was not evoking ethnic nationalism, because of the complexity of identity in the post-Soviet space and the fact that ethnic nationalism is not feasible in the Russian context. And the third reason is that Moscow’s relations with Russian minorities abroad since the Soviet collapse depends on the context. Although the nationalist rhetoric regarding protecting Russians abroad resonates with the domestic audience, it is used as a pretense for geopolitics.

First, the influence of nationalists on Russian foreign policy is negligible and there is a lack of unity amongst the nationalist movements. Russian identity did not develop as an ethnic identity or a territorial one tied to the territory of the Russian Federation, and the collapse of the Soviet Union forced the question of how to define the new Russian state and what constituted the Russian nation. In the 1990s, debates proliferated over what Russian identity means. There were those in the Yeltsin administration who hoped to create a Russian state with a shared, supra-ethnic identity and they promoted the use of rossiyanе as an ethnically neutral term for the people of Russia. (Disappointment and disillusionment with the Yeltsin years subsequently

discredited the term.) Various anti-Yeltsin groups put forward their own visions of national identity, advocating imperialism, territorial revisionism, and Eurasianism. Although vocal nationalists remain in Russian society today, there is no one nationalist narrative or position that is agreed upon by all, which complicates the adoption of any one nationalist platform as official policy.

Conflation of nationalist rhetoric from outside the presidential administration with the Kremlin’s motivations can be highly problematic. Political decision-making in Russia is highly centralized in the Kremlin and more nuanced than the positions endorsed by nationalist groups. Nationalist or conservative trends in society may influence what the Kremlin perceives as doable or desirable (such as the ongoing discussions with Japan over the Kuril Islands), but the influence of the systematic opposition parties or individuals outside of Putin’s inner circle is negligible. Although parties such as LDPR have leaders whose rhetoric can be considered nationalist or populist, it is likely they provide the Kremlin with information about trends in society but have little impact on the political process (A professor at the Higher School of Economics described Zhirinovskiy as a useful barometer for the Kremlin, but with no real influence).

The annexation of Crimea divided the nationalists in Russia, further showing the lack of unity and the marginal role of nationalists in society. Several leading ethnonationalists did not believe the Kremlin’s rhetoric about protecting ethnic Russians, as they felt Putin’s government had never done enough for their ethnic compatriots, and they did not support the annexation. Navalny denounced the official justification as “a fib and provocation.” The war in eastern Ukraine did not win over the nationalists, especially because they took the Kremlin’s official declarations of noninvolvement to heart. Some said Putin was turning the Ukrainians into Russophobes and others decried the Kremlin for not providing enough aid to the rebels. But, Pål Kolstø writes that “the Putin regime does not stand or fall with support from the professed nationalists.” The nationalists remain in small numbers on the margins, and while they might write increasingly hysterical posts on social media, they have little real influence.

Secondly, ethnic nationalism is not feasible as official policy in the Russian context. Putin and his circle believe in a strong state, and they see nationalism, especially ethnic-nationalism, as dangerous to their state-building project. Radical nationalists are prosecuted by the regime and many of the leaders of such groups are in jail. Putin has stressed that Russia is a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional country, and that those who support the slogan “Russia for (ethnic) Russians” (Россия для Русских) are advocating for the collapse of the Russian Federation. When the state does appropriate nationalist concepts and rhetoric, it is for domestic audiences, in part to

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5 Interview by author, January 2019.
7 Ibid 709.
8 Ibid, 714.
9 Ibid 724.
respond to a social demand “from the bottom” and in part to avoid allowing nationalist sentiment to create possible opposition to United Russia.\(^\text{11}\)

Putin’s evocations of history and emotion were likely more indicative of the historical significance of Crimea and Ukraine than a turn towards ethnic nationalism. Russian identity, and, indeed, the Russian World, is based on more than ethnicity. History, culture, language, and religion all play a role. The history referenced is not solely that of ethnic Russians. When Putin spoke of Sevastopol, Balaklava, and Kerch as places that symbolize “Russian military glory and outstanding valor,” and spoke of the Russian soldiers buried on the peninsula, he was not referring to ethnic Russian military glory or ethnic Russian dead.\(^\text{12}\) If ethnic nationalism drove decision-making, it is likely anti-Ukraine sentiment would appear in official rhetoric, but Putin has continuously spoken of Russians and Ukrainians as one people, united by history, language, religion, and culture, and differentiated between the post-Maidan government in Kiev and the Ukrainian people.\(^\text{13}\)

And thirdly, while rhetoric regarding protecting Russians abroad resonates with the general population, it is a pretense for geopolitics. Moscow has continuously asserted its interests in the post-Soviet space for a wide range of reasons, but Marlene Laruelle writes that “Russia has not adopted any unified policy for dealing with Russian minorities in the Near Abroad, and there is no primordialist approach that would make Russia a natural and systematic ‘defender’ of them.”\(^\text{14}\) The Kremlin’s interactions with Russian minorities abroad since the Soviet collapse suggests that they are instrumentalized when it is seen as beneficial.

The idea of “compatriot” (соотечественник) was adopted from the Congress of Russian Communities (refashioned as Rodina in 2003), the only nationalist movement to have any of its ideas make it to the level of state policy. But through adoption, the nationalistic elements were lost. As the concept was integrated into the broader narratives promoted by the regime, it lost its conflict potential.\(^\text{15}\) Initially “compatriot” had a clear ethnic/linguistic focus and was only meant to include ethnic Russians and Slavic populations in the Near Abroad.\(^\text{16}\) But the state’s co-option of the term broadened it extensively and removed the ethnic focus; official documents on the subject legally define compatriots as Russian citizens abroad, people spiritually and culturally oriented towards Russia (such as those in Donetsk and Lugansk), people whose ancestors lived on the territory of the Soviet Union and Russian Empire, and those who speak Russian, appreciate Russian culture, and “identify with the cause of Russia.”\(^\text{17}\) The ambiguity of the official definition of compatriot is highly beneficial, as it creates a term that can refer to any

\(^{11}\) Marlene Laruelle, “Introduction,” 8.

\(^{12}\) “Обращение Президента Российской Федерации,” События, Президент России.

\(^{13}\) Putin has said “Русские и украинцы - один народ” multiple times - at the concert celebrating the anniversary of the annexation in 2015 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmidOeyX6Go), at the Valdai Conference in 2016 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chKDbWsXZHq), at his annual address in 2017 (https://ria.ru/20171214/1510927363.html).


\(^{16}\) Ibid 94.

\(^{17}\) Ibid 94.
population in the post-Soviet space. The adoption of the concept provides the Kremlin with a useful narrative for domestic audiences, but interactions with compatriots in the post-Soviet space suggests those populations (whether ethnic Russians, Russian speakers, or citizens of the Russian Federation) are instrumentalized when it serves Moscow’s interests.

The relationship between compatriots and Moscow depends on relations between Moscow and the government in the respective country. When Russian minorities are deemed potentially separatist, it often signals contentious relations between Russia and the other country. Moscow does not have a universal foreign policy approach to the post-Soviet states and their populations, but rather a set of policies that depend on a number of factors specific to each country. This complicates the idea that something like the Crimean annexation could be easily replicated. As the Baltic states passed restrictive citizenship laws and refused to join post-Soviet regional institutions, Russia reported violations to the European Court of Human Rights and conducted cyber-attacks in Estonia. Through supporting the de facto state of Transnistria in Moldova, Moscow has hoped to slow the country’s European integration. Conversely in Central Asia, Russia has never sought to mobilize the Russian populations, even when unfavorable policies, such as ending dual citizenship or adopting anti-Russia narratives, are pursued by the countries in question.18

Russian narratives regarding the August War in 2008 are an example of how official rhetoric can be intended for domestic audiences and does not match reality. Russian commentators insisted that the conflict and recognition of the secessionist entities were inevitable because of Georgian aggression and that the intervention was a moral, humanitarian matter to defend Russian citizens.19 They focused exclusively on Georgian culpability, ignoring allegations that Russia’s actions were disproportionate and not legally justified.20 But observers outside Russia saw the war very differently, as a Russian response to what it perceived were red lines being crossed. Michael Kofman writes that the August War signaled “the return of great-power politics and the end of the post-Cold War period,” as “Moscow demonstrated the will and ability to actively contest the U.S. vision for European security, veto NATO expansion in its neighborhood, and challenge Washington's design for a normative international order where small states can determine their own affairs.”21 The war took place towards the end of a year that included Western recognition of Kosovo and the Bucharest Summit’s declaration that Georgia and Ukraine would join NATO, on top of worsening relations between Moscow and Tbilisi.

Although in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea protecting Russians and Russia speakers was given as justification for Moscow’s actions, it is highly unlikely that was the true impetus for decision-making. The Kremlin used a variety of narratives, including referencing western double standards in recognizing Kosovo and the war in Iraq. Security concerns, such as NATO’s eastward expansion and the strategic significance of Crimea, likely played much larger role in the annexation than any concerns about Russians there. It is probable Ukraine lost Crimea

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18 Ibid 67.
20 Ibid 33.
because the Kremlin felt that red lines were crossed with Maidan rather than because of the peninsula’s ethnic or linguistic makeup.

And even though Putin declared that the “Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest, ethnic groups in the world to be divided by borders” and the Kremlin officially recognized that the Russian territory does not contain all of the Russian nation, it was not necessarily a signal of revisionist ambitions. Moscow’s relations with the Russian minorities abroad has always depended on context. Marlene Laruelle writes that “the ‘divided nation’ argument remains instrumental: it is part of the discursive repertoire of Russia’s foreign policy, deployed whenever the Kremlin needs to penalize a neighbor for its geopolitical or political disloyalty, but it does not appear as a driver of routine foreign policy decisions.”

The annexation of Crimea is unlikely to be reversed in the near future, but mobilization potential does not last forever. Such mobilization is not sustainable and the elation has subsided. Today Putin’s approval ratings are dropping as concerns about the economy and other social problems rise. Because political utility determines the usage of the nationalist narratives, usage of the concepts, such as the Russian World, referenced in the aftermath of the Crimean annexation have faded from official use. But in examining the events of 2014 and the years since, nationalist rhetoric does not present the full picture of what went into decision-making in the Kremlin. Taking the nationalist rhetoric at face value can misconstrue the real reasons behind decision-making and complicate the formulation of adequate responses.

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22 Marlene Laruelle, “Russia as a ‘Divided Nation,’ from Compatriots to Crimea,” 95.
23 Ibid 95.