



Russian national identity and the Ukrainian crisis



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ABSTRACT

No aspect of the Russian–Ukrainian war has proved more unexpected than the revelation that Ukrainian national identity both ethnic and civil is far stronger than almost anyone thought, while Russian national identity is far more fragmented and weak than most expected. That was especially surprising to many because Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine on the assumption that Ukrainians are not a “real” nation unlike Russians and that his actions were advancing the interest of what the Kremlin leader chooses to call “the Russian world”. One result of this discovery has been that the Kremlin has had to take Ukrainian identity more seriously. Another has been that it has gone to great lengths to promote Russian national identity via state-controlled media, but the latter effort has come up short because Moscow’s ability to promote Russian identity is limited by the same three factors that have restricted previous Russian rulers: the fundamental weakness of Russian identity, the tensions inherent between identities the state supports and those it fears, and the reactions of the increasingly numerous non-Russian nationalities to any ethnic Russian identifications.

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Vladimir Putin like many Russians operates on the basis of the largely unexamined assumption that Russian identity is both ancient and strong. His propaganda simply asserts this without much regard to the facts. He makes language, religion and history central to the understanding he projects, but all of those characteristics, while not unimportant, are perhaps necessary but not sufficient conditions for the existence of Russian national identity. That has become obvious not only to many Russians but to others as Putin has engaged in a war against Ukraine, a people he says that is not a separate nation but rather a part of the Russian one. As a result, the Ukrainian war has highlighted the fragility of Russian national identity and the incomplete nature of Putin’s offering.

No aspect of the Russian–Ukrainian war has proved more unexpected than the revelation that Ukrainian national identity both ethnic and civil is far stronger than almost anyone thought, while Russian national identity is far more fragmented and weak than most expected. That was especially surprising to many because Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine on the assumption that Ukrainians are not a “real” nation unlike Russians and that his actions were advancing the interest of what the Kremlin leader chooses to call “the Russian world.”

One result of this discovery has been that the Kremlin and the West have had to take Ukrainian identity far more seriously than they expected and another has been that it has gone to great lengths to promote Russian national identity via state-controlled media, but the latter effort has come up short because Moscow’s ability to promote Russian identity is limited by the same three factors that have restricted previous Russian rulers: the fundamental weakness of Russian identity, the tensions inherent between identities the state supports and those it fears, and the reactions of the increasingly numerous non-Russian nationalities to any ethnic Russian identifications (Goble in Kappeler, 1990).

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Indeed, at least one of the reasons that Putin went to war in Ukraine was to solidify his version of Russian national identity so that it could provide him with the kind of popular support he craves without constituting the threat that a genuine Russian nationalist movement independent of the state would represent. After the protests of 2011–2012, the Kremlin leader looked out at a Russian nation whose members defined themselves not by what they are and who they want to be but by what they fear and view as alien, a nation in short that was clearly fraying at the edges with some, like the Siberians, identifying first and foremost with a region, others like the Cossacks in terms of a specific historical community, and still a third with the state more than with the people.²

One prominent Russian nationalist, Pavel Svyatenkov (2014) acknowledged the weakness of Russian identity and the strength of Ukrainian identity shortly after the start of the war. He argued that Russians have neither a supra-national non-ethnic identity of the kind the state has wanted or an ethnic one that nationalists would like to see while Ukrainians have both, something Russians should not only acknowledge but copy. Most people think that the Russian national movement is about defending “the Russian people and a single Russian identity,” Svyatenkov said at that time, but if one considers the question more closely, it turns out that what is called “the Russian national movement” consists of “a great multitude of mini-identities,” Cossack, regional, fan clubs and the like (Svyatenkov, 2014).

Thus, instead of being a movement itself, the Russian national movement “is in essence a union of subcultures,” something that wouldn’t be a bad thing “if the subcultures existed on the basis of a single Russian identity”. But that is not the case. Instead, each represents its own “small ‘nation,’ and there is no larger one.” In other words,” Svyatenkov wrote, “people call themselves Russian nationalists but do this on the basis of a subculture, on that of their own mini-identity. And if Russians as a whole are a people but not a nation, the subculture [of each] begins to replace the nation” as a whole and undermines the possibility of its formation. (Svyatenkov, 2014; Goble, 2013).

Ethnic Russian identity is not formulated clearly, something which becomes obvious if one compares it to Ukrainian identity, which is based on “consciousness” and “the acceptance of Ukrainism as an ideological anti-Russian doctrine,” which often takes the form of the conviction that “‘Ukraine is not Russia,’” as former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma (2003) titled his book. A very important quality of this Ukrainian identity is its “ability to integrate outsiders: study Ukrainian and say that you are a Ukrainian and ‘welcome to the club.’” But that is not how Russians who call themselves Russian nationalists act. Instead, many of them are in the business of excluding people on the basis of inheritance or something else (Nicholson, 2003).

At present, Svyatenkov (2014) said: “the concept of ‘a drop of non-Russian blood’ dominates,” which means that someone who has any non-Russian ancestors won’t be accepted as a Russian even if he wants to be and which has the effect of excluding from the Russian nation even its national heroes like Pushkin and ultimately all Russians as well. While it “deprives Russians of Russian identity, this concept does not lead to the appearance of any new self-identification.” Instead, it reduces Russians to the status of “a nameless biomass which does not even have a self-designator” or its own state and which is easily infected by “the virus of Soviet [-style] racism”.

The success of Ukrainianism as an inclusive national project, Svyatenkov suggested, is having a demonstration effect on many of the Russian mini-cultures such as the Pomors or Sibiryaks who are beginning to think about advancing their own agendas by being welcoming to others but not about forming a single Russian nation. These groups have not been successful so far because “Russians are still a sufficiently homogeneous people” even if they are not a nation. “But gradually the split will grow” given that the regime views the Russian as “a Eurasian slave who does not have a Motherland” and “sooner or later” there will be “an explosion of separatism and the formation on the basis of the Russian people of several, already not Russian but possibly anti-Russian nations.”

The logic of such groups who are “‘running toward Ukrainianism’” is clear, Svyatenkov argued, and it can only be opposed by an analogous effort to promote an inclusive vision of a Russian nation, one that accepts people on the basis either of their origin or their desire to be a part of it and strives to form a single nation with its own state. “If Russian identity is not made ‘inclusive,’” Svyatenkov warned in conclusion, “the split of Russian identity will only deepen and not only on the Ukrainian issue. It threatens to pass into the entire people. Preventing that from happening,” he said, “is our task.” But it is quite clear from his words that this will not be an easy one.

Svyatenkov is far from the only one wrestling with this problem. In a survey of discussions by scholars and politicians about it today, Anna Bryzgalova (2014) cited the opinions of three others who are seeking to identify what a Russian nation is or might be in the future. And Raisa Barash, a researcher at the Moscow Institute of Sociology, has argued that the problem of the Russian nation today is a reflection of the fact that “Russians were deprived of the chance to realize their right to their own ethno-subjectiveness,” that is, of their right to form their own state.

² The rapid spread and intensification of Siberian identity is a far greater threat to the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation east of the Urals than is the Peoples Republic of China is, according to both Russian census officials and residents of that enormous and potentially wealthy region now controlled and ruled from Moscow. Census officials in Siberia acknowledge that an impressive number of residents of Tyumen, Omsk, Novosibirsk, Kemerovo, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, Barnaul and Yakutsk identified themselves as Siberians by nationality in the 2010 census (“*Russkiy reportyor*, 2011) Three things are striking about that. First, the officials say, “the majority of these people considered themselves [ethnic] Russians” only eight years earlier. Second, there really are a lot of them and not just a few marginal as the media have suggested. And third, there would be even more “if the census had worked as it was supposed to.” The 2010 census didn’t, however, as the officials concede. Many census workers didn’t bother to visit people, they say, but simply “filled up the forms” with information from residency records, and wrote down “Russian” when anyone declared that he or she was a Siberian by nationality.

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