Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal

University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

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Source: Groundings Undergraduate, September 2001, Vol. 1, pp. 68-82

Published by: Glasgow University Dialectic Society, University of Glasgow

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

Issue Digitised by A. C. Fitch-Holland

Russian Nationalism: Creating a Civic Identity

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A shared sense of identity within a state is a stabilising structure allowing a focus for citizens to rally around. As a multi-ethnic state Russia has always been faced with the problem of how to imbue its citizens with a sense of identity that strengthens the state without causing dissent among the majority ethnic Russians or the many different minorities encapsulated within its territory. The choice between a civic based identity and an ethnically based national identity has faced the ruling apparatus for hundreds of years, and still poses a problem for both the people and the government of today's Russia.

National identity is a key component in building strong states. People are more invested in and more committed to the government and institutions of a state when they are able to identify with it on a political or ethnic basis.

In conditions of weak statehood tradition, nationalizing states are required to invest a great deal of institutional capacity in the construction of a new national identity.[1]

National identity and nationalist rhetoric have been used by many states to build a powerful symbol or idea of the nation that people can directly relate to ethnically. An exclusive state makes people feel more patriotic and more willing to work to make the state the best it can be, at least for those ethnically defined to be included by it. In contrast, a civic identity takes a multi-ethnic approach and asks people to identify with the state structures to define themselves. Instead of binding people together along blood lines it claims that living under one government in one territory should be the defining feature of the country. Theoretically, race does not play a part, people

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1 James Hughes, "Managing Secession Potential in the Russian Federation", *Regional and Federal Studies* 11 (Autumn 2001): 36-68.

will invest themselves economically and politically into bettering the state for everyone.

National identity is, in some ways, easier to build on an ethnic basis than on a civic one. This is particularly true in Russia as states throughout Russian history have based their unifying role on concepts of 'Great Russian-ness' and the 'sviaz vremen' ('tie of ages'); whereas the civic concept of the Russian Federation has only existed for fifteen years.[2] The key to identity of any kind for a state would seem to be ideology. In this sense I refer loosely to a base set of principles which provide the foundations of the state. Nationalism is a strong ideology that can very quickly bind a state together; Socialism and Marxist-Leninism were portrayed in a similar light and fostered by the Soviet Union as the key to its identity. However, the Russian Federation can not employ either of these identities to define all of its citizens. Since 1991 different people have made attempts at creating a new concept of identity for the Russian Federation, at different times attempting to incorporate different ideologies, but the pendulous nature of policies has had divisive as well as amalgamating effects.

The Soviet Union, from its very beginning, acknowledged the difficulties posed by the existence of the many different nationalities within it; however this was treated as a positive rather than a negative feature. Initially, people were encouraged to foster a dual identity of sorts, as a Soviet citizen as well as a person from a certain nation. In the long run the individual nationalities were expected to 'whither away' and the identity remaining would lose all ethnic basis and become the political and class identity of the Soviet citizen.

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known as Lenin, created a federal system for managing the different regions within the vast expanse that was the Soviet Union. Nations were differentiated and given a measure of national selfdetermination within the confines of the Soviet state. This did not only extend to the national republics such as Latvia and Uzbekistan but smaller territories within the republics were also given ethnic designations even when the titular nation was not a majority in the region. These designations were hierarchical in nature and given less political autonomy down the scale. The official unifying ideology for the Soviet Union was Socialism but

2 Stephen D. Shenfield, "Post-Soviet Russia in Search of Identity" in *Russia's Future: Consolidation or Disintegration?*, Douglas Blum, ed., (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994), 6.

in the early days of the Civil War Lenin realised that nationalism could be used as a strong motivating factor for people and as a useful tool for strengthening the state. A lesson was learnt from experiences of the Tsarist Empire; nationalism could be a strong destabilising force that added weight to revolutionary movements. By institutionalising ethnic identity Lenin aimed to bring its power under the states control.

The vast numbers of these nationalities deprived of rights, and the sharpness of their deprivations, gave to the national problem in Tsarist Russia a gigantic explosive force.[3]

Lenin was not going to make the same mistake and so founded his federal structure in such a way that allowed for national expression; to some extent, his nationalities policy even encouraged it. The Korenizatsiia (Indigenisation) policy meant that native cultures that previously had no written language could be formalised and allowed greater expression. Each of the national republics was allowed to use their own languages and have institutes of science and culture. During this period the people of the newly formed Soviet Union experienced more freedom than they ever had before. Nations were granted the right to secede from the Union if they chose to do so. Naturally this was more in theory than in practice. Lenin himself said:

To accuse those who support freedom of self-determination, i.e., freedom to secede, of encouraging separation, is as foolish and hypocritical as accusing those who advocate freedom of divorce of encouraging the destruction of family ties.[4]

The final aspect of Lenin's policy towards nationalism involved the eradication of Great Russian Chauvinism. Russia had always held a privileged role in the Tsarist Empire which was the cause of much resentment by the other nations. Lenin undertook to overcome this resentment in many ways, to the point of excluding any references to 'Russia' in official documents after the revolution simply referring to 'the Workers' State'.[5]

3 Leon Trotsky, "The History of the Russian Revolution"; available at http://easyweb.easynet.co.uk/~socappeal/russia/part8.html; internet; accessed 30 May 2007.

4 Rob Sewell, "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination"; available at http://www.marxist.com/lenin-national-question160604.htm; 30 May 2007.

5 Trotsky, *History*, internet.

All Lenin's nationalising policies were meant to bring the different nations together in a voluntary union, not just one enforced from the centre. The identification of different nations was supposed to be transitional, gradually the nations were meant to come together (sblizhenie) and eventually merge (sliyanie), the only identity would be that of a Soviet citizen, nationalism would simply whither away.

Following Lenin's death, arguably, Stalin selected the most negative aspects of Lenin's nationalities policy and ignored those most positive, then proceeded to consolidate the Soviet state under these principles. This is particularly ironic considering his Georgian background. He clearly reinstated Great Russian Chauvinism drawing on Russia's heroes of old to encourage national spirit during 'the Great Patriotic War'. Stalin reintroduced old Tsarist policies of Russification and forced the predominance of the Russian language and culture on the rest of the Union. Lenin believed that the Soviet Union needed one common language for communication but not to the exclusion of all others, which is what Stalin attempted to implement. The concept of Russia as the leader of all the Soviet peoples was officially reintroduced in 1955 in the 'Kratkii filosofskii slovar':

All peoples and nations of the USSR see in the great Russian people their best friend and guide, their elder brother, who played a decisive role in the struggle for the victory of the proletarian revolution and triumph of socialism.[6]

This concept was espoused by all of the subsequent leaders of the party after Stalin and was still mentioned in official propaganda on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The idea of an over-arching civic identity as a Soviet citizen was most enthusiastically carried out in the Russian republic. This was the only republic not given institutions for upholding its culture and language, instead the Russians were encouraged to identify with the entire Soviet Union as their rodina (homeland), hence the high degree of out-migration to the other republics.

6 Meredith Roman, "Making Caucasians Black: Moscow since the Fall of Communism and the Radicalization of Non-Russians" in *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* Vol. 18, No. 2 (June 2002), 1-27.

As the Soviet Union began to unravel and the outlying Socialist republics began their 'National Awakenings' to reassert their independence, the Russian republic was in the unique position of having based its national identity on its civic identity as the leader of all of the other nations. The Estonians had been Estonian before Soviet citizens and so reclaiming independence meant throwing off their Soviet identity and creating new state structures within Estonian national identity. The loss of Russia's leadership role and the end of Soviet socialist ideology left Russian identity in a state of limbo.

The loss of their 'big homeland' has consequently had a deeply disturbing impact on many Russian psyches.[7]

Ethnic Russians became an easy target for Yeltsin's appeal to Russian nationalism in his bid to out do Gorbachev.

By 1989 Gorbachev's policies of Glasnost, Perestroika and Democratisation within the Communist Soviet framework had run their course. It no longer seemed possible to reform the system from within. Nationalities had been given a chance to assert themselves and now they intended to take it to its logical conclusion of independence. The March 1989 elections to the new Congress of People's Deputies returned nationalistically minded people from the republics who intended to ally themselves with liberal Russian reformers; Boris Yeltsin being the leading figure. It became clear that Yeltsin's best chance at asserting his influence over Russia was nationalism; getting people to associate themselves primarily with the Russian Republic as opposed to the entire Soviet Union and therefore with his authority as the leader of it instead of Gorbachev's as President of the whole of the USSR.

Yeltsin's resolution of the coal mining strikes in the Kubass and Donbass regions of Russia played a large part in creating and maintaining his image as protector of Russians and had the added effect of making Gorbachev appear superfluous. In 1990 as the Parade of Sovereignties swept the USSR, Yeltsin was elected Chair of the Russian Supreme Soviet and declared its sovereignty as well. After Yeltsin saved Gorbachev in the attempted 1991 coup by the hardliners of the party it became clear that even a new Union treaty would not save Gorbachev and the Soviet Union. Yeltsin had successfully mobilised Russian nationalist sentiment to create the First Russian Republic.

7 Blum, *Russia's Future*, 7.

During the Parade of Sovereignties, while the Russian state was at it weakest, Yeltsin encouraged the republics to 'take as much sovereignty as they could swallow'. The status of several ethnic autonomous formations was even increased: the Adygei, Altai and Khakassia autonomous oblasts were constituted as separate republics.[8]

This idea continued to be upheld as bi-lateral treaties were made with the separate regions giving them huge amounts of autonomy. This period of asymmetric federalism has been characterised as both positive and negative in terms of the creation of post-Soviet identity in the Russian Federation.

Asymmetric federalism has acted as an institutional counterweight to centuries of ethnic Russian hegemonic control and the policies of Russification, coercion and centralization that accompanied it.[9]

This sentiment mirrored Lenin's in his creation of the federal structure of the Soviet Union and attempt to eradicate Great Russian Chauvinism. The difference however, is that in the USSR Russians made up just over 50% of the population, whereas the Russian Federation had a population of more than 80% ethnic Russians.
For this reason asymmetric Federalism was heavily resented by ethnic Russian nationalists and in part contributed to their radicalisation. It was characterised as multi-ethnic bargaining and seen as a betrayal of the Russian nation.[10]

Scholars associate asymmetric federalism with a dangerous 'ethnification' of Russian politics that was seen as an obstacle to the building of a harmonizing 'civic' national identity.[11]

An emphasis was placed on the autonomy of the regions. Many introduced nationalist policies on religion or language that were in direct conflict with the federal constitution.

Nationalizing policies in Tatarstan have a strong cultural dimension (mosque building, rewriting of textbooks and Latinization of the Tatar alphabet).[12]

8 See Anders Aslund and Martha Brill Olcott, ed., *Russia after Communism* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).
9 Hughes, *Managing Secession*, 39.
10 Ibid., 46.
11 Ibid., 38.
12 Ibid., 43.

Although many of the regions talked about sovereignty and autonomy, a lot of their demands were more to do with economic grievances than the need to define themselves ethnically. Donor regions to the federal centre did much better out of the bi-lateral treaties than recipient regions; those of greater economic importance to the centre had something to bargain with.

During the early period of his presidency, up until 1992, Yeltsin made a concerted effort to foster a civic identity among Russians being careful always to refer to the people of Russia (Rossiyani) and not to the ethnic Russians (Russkie). However, the main focus of this period was establishing the mechanisms of the state and attempting to start economic transition processes. Yeltsin needed to get popular support for these policies and so when it seemed people were no longer responding to the idea of the Russian civic identity he changed his position. He instead focussed on a highly exclusive definition of Russians, emphasising their imperial past, defined by a common language. This promoted the intervention of Russia into the 'near abroad': the embracing of the Russian diaspora living in the newly independent states surrounding her.

This clearly appealed to the old idea of Russia having dominion over these areas; Russia was seen again as the protector of all Russian peoples. Naturally, this approach was not welcomed by the newly independent states and none of them agreed to the joint citizenship proposal Yeltsin put forward: not wanting Russia to have a stake in their affairs. Due to this reaction, Yeltsin took a step back and instead promoted the idea of a universal Commonwealth of Independent States citizenship policy.

This was further championed by Yeltsin during the Russian presidential elections in 1996. By then the consequences of privatisation had hit and his popularity was waning. Yeltsin appealed to Russian nationalism in the form of a common Slavic identity and used the potential Union with Belarus as a major nationalist issue to trumpet his cause.

After he had won the presidency, Yeltsin's nationalist rhetoric died down again. He introduced several new policies that were clearly aimed at taking away power from the ethno-territorial basis of the Federation and moving to a more civic identity. The National Cultural Autonomy Act was passed, aimed at fulfilling the promise of the

Russian Constitution to confer extra-territorial rights on all ethnic groups regardless of place of residence. NCAs were set up throughout the country to address national and cultural rights of citizens; by 1999 227 NCAs had been formed, mainly by diaspora groups outside any national territory.

In 1997, in a clear move towards a civic identity for Russia, the 'fifth point' was removed from Russian passports. People were no longer required to define their nationality or ethnicity as they had been throughout the entire Soviet period. However, the passports were only produced in the Russian language and the Tsarist double headed eagle was put on the cover. This produced anger on both sides of the spectrum. Nationalist Russians were angry that their ethnic identity was being erased. Minorities were angry that their languages were being ignored and feared the threat of further Russian assimilation.

Yeltsin's presidency faced a problem. It was the regional centres of the Russian Federation which supported him in the final days of the Soviet Union and in his 1996 presidential campaign. Yeltsin now required, however, popular support and legitimacy on a national level. An appeal to nationalism would galvanise internal support but risk damaging relations with the regional centres.

In 1999 Vladimir Putin did not owe his position to help from the regions and in fact gained support from the populace on the basis of recentralising the state to make it strong again. Putin closely followed the suggestions of Valerii Tishkov[13] on how to create a civic identity in Russia. Tishkov claimed that the 'dissemination of common civic values and symbols among citizens of the Russian Federation is crucial.' Putin brought back the music from the Soviet national anthem that everyone knew and had the same composer write new words to the same tune. The Red Soviet flag became the flag of the armed forces to appease Russian nationalists, while the tri-colour flag was accepted as the national flag and the double-headed eagle became the new national emblem. While these symbols were still very 'Russian' there was an attempt to move away from the symbols Yeltsin had resurrected such as the music from Mikhail Glinka's first Russian National opera; 'A life for the Tsar'.[14] Putin also took a step back

13 Vera Tolz, *Inventing the Nation – Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 249.

14 Vera Tolz, "A Future Russia: A Nation-state or a Multi-national Federation" in *The Legacy of the Soviet Union*, Wendy Slater and Andrew Wilson, ed., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 27.

from the idea of a common Eastern Slavic identity and changed the citizenship law to only recognise those living in the Russian Federation as citizens instead of all of the ethnic Russians living in the near abroad.

Tishkov's second principle was to reorganise the federal nature of the Russian Federation in such a way that it was no longer based on ethno-territories. He claimed this would avoid 'dangerous terminological confusion, which could trigger the disintegration of the Federation.'[15] Hence Putin introduced seven super-regions which correspond to no ethnic boundaries. Although these are run by his direct appointees they are a step towards a more civic type of federalism if not democratic federalism.

The last of Tishkov's principles has only been implemented in part. He believes that individual rights should take precedence over collective rights, parties based on ethnic principles should be banned yet the representation of ethnic minorities in government should be safeguarded by law. Putin's recent draft law, which comes into effect in time for the 2007 parliamentary elections, will prevent political parties from standing only in specific regions, They will have to have national standing, meaning that, in effect, no minority nationalist parties can form as no diaspora is spread out enough to gain support in enough regions to adhere to the law. This does not affect the Russian nationalists; they still can and do have political parties with support around Russia such as Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). While Putin seems to be consolidating a more civic identity for the Russian Federation he still emphasises Russian nationalism, drawing on it as his support base as much as any other.

Russian Nationalism has been growing since as early as 1987 when Pamyat', a Russian Nationalist organisation was formed; its ideals were to the three traditional Russian values of: 'Orthodoxy, national character and spirituality'.

Pamyat' was formed on the rallying cry of Russia's return to its Slavic roots and a call for the eradication of unhealthy foreign influences from its culture and territory.[16]

15 Tolz, *Inventing the Nation*, 250.

16 Fran Markowitz, "'Not Nationalists, Russian Teenagers' Soulful A-politics" in *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 51 No. 7 (1999): 1183.

Even before that, in the early 1980s, a high up Komsomol official circulated a manifesto demanding the sterilisation of all Russian women who 'give themselves to foreigners'.[17]

Support for Russian nationalism can be seen in new found popularity of the Orthodox Church; in the 1970s 6-10% of the population counted itself as Orthodox, in 1996 it had risen to over 50%: Putin himself converted in the early 1990s after a life-threatening fire in his dacha.[18] This has brought complaints from the Muslim dominated republics concerning the 'Pravoslavizatsiia' or 'Orthodoxisation' of Russia at a federal level.[19]

Further evidence for the rise of nationalist sentiment in Russia is the appearance of neo-Nazi groups such as the Russian National Unity movement. Forty-four people were killed by neo-Nazis in Russia in 2004, as one member said "We must fight ethnic groups that threaten our state and destroy the Russian national culture".[20] It is unclear how a nine year old Tajik girl, who was stabbed eleven times in front of her father by ten neo-Nazis in St Petersburg, threatened the Russian national culture.

Luckily it does not seem that the majority of young people feel this way, many have embraced a new concept of civic identity within the Russian Federation. For them the most important aspects of citizenship emphasised 'soul' or 'dusha' over 'blood'. Being born and/or living in Russia was important but much more so, was speaking some level of Russian and cherishing Russia as a homeland.[21] Upholding Russian values is more important than being ethnically Russian. The very idea of only defining Russians by blood seemed absurd to young people interviewed in 1999.

Lena R.: My own background is like this: one of my greatgrandmothers is Turkmeni, or Tajik. My grandfather, my father's father, is Ukrainian. Many of us are mixed in this way. Russia is a mixture. That's what makes Russia today,

17 Hayda, Lubomyr and Mark Beissinger, *The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990), 289.

18 Tolz, *Inventing the Nation*, 263.

19 Tolz, *A Future Russia*, 26.

20 These statistics from Amnesty International are quoted by Anna Badkhen, "A Gathering Storm of Russian Thugs", *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 August 2005; Ibid.

21 Markowitz, *Not Nationalists*, 1187.

and it is hard to pull this mixture apart. And it shouldn't be. To those who say Russia must be absolutely Slavic, I absolutely disagree.[22]

However, the same young people who proclaimed these inclusive statements also spoke of 'the problem of 'lits kavkazskikh natsional'nostei' referring to the bad attitude of new comers who disregarded what they considered to be the norms of Russian hospitality.[23]

Veronika: No I am not completely against the slogan 'Russia for the Russians' because here in Russia there are refugees who, especially from Georgia, are bringing in guns and drugs and lots of crime. I think, close the border and the crime will go away.[24]

There has also been a new defining of racial stereotypes since the Soviet period. It used to be "Azeris as artists, Armenians as poets, Georgians as musicians and Uzbeks as dancers" now it has become "Azeris as drug-traffickers, Armenians as book keepers, Georgians as car thieves and Uzbeks as weapons dealers".[25]

Institutionalised racism has emerged in such a way that was always abhorred during the Soviet period, when the Soviet Union believed it had 'discovered the cure for racism'.[26] The use of the official registration system for all visitors to Russia has been used as an excuse to crack down on ethnic minorities, particularly in Moscow. Naturally the Chechen war and the apartment bombings have added to the racism towards anyone who looks even slightly Caucasian.

Moscow has been officially re-imagined as white and Slavic.[27]

The police services are often heavy-handed in their dealings with ethnic minorities in the capital.

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 1190.
24 Ibid., 1192.
25 Roman, *Making Caucasians Black*, 6.
26 Ibid., 1.
27 Ibid., 3.

Harassment can be so severe that for the person of colour it means being stopped as many as ten times a day for document checks, being fined five times a day, being detained at the police station once a day and being subjected to physical abuse three times a day.[28]

Naturally all of this harassment is seen by the white, Slavic people of the city but this simply adds to the criminal stereotype, as people from ethnic minorities are seen being arrested all the time it is assumed that many of them must be guilty.

The transition from Soviet citizen to citizen of the Russian Federation has been difficult for both the government and the people. For 80 years Russians saw themselves as the leader of a multinational super power nation and previously as the Tsarist Empire they were recognised as one of the Great Powers. Now, their territory has been much reduced, their economic capacity has been destroyed and, for a time, they have been largely ignored on the world stage. Within their own country they have seen minority nationalities gain preferential rights and status than them and in some cases been strongly discriminated against in recompense for their previous Soviet, privileged status. The turn towards Russian nationalism in this context can be understood.

However, Putin has made considerable moves to creating a viable civic identity for the people of the Russian Federation in his steps to create a strong state. A civic identity needs to be based on a sense of common purpose and identification with the institutions of the state. The people of the Russian Federation seem to be showing by voting for Putin, that a strong state matters more to them than democratic ideals. It is a strong state that they can identify with and want to build their own identity upon.

Putin appeals to other facets of the population in other ways, appealing to nationalism in his support of the church: fiscally, politically and spiritually. He risks, however, alienating the Muslim population of Russia through his vocal support for the 'war on terror' as well as the continued military action in Chechnya. Yet intermittently portraying Russia as a close ally of the US does give it a higher ranking on the world stage and therefore more international status; something important to all of the citizens of the Russian Federation.

28 Ibid., 14.

While it is clear that Russian Nationalism is still a force to be reckoned with within the Russian Federation, it seems that Putin is making steps to embed a civic identity among Russians. Hopefully, as the Chechen situation is resolved he will make a more decisive move to get rid of the significant Caucasian racism which is linked to expressions of Russian nationalism. The Russian young people of today, who barely experienced the institutionalised ethnicity of the Soviet Union are comfortable with a civic identity within the Russian Federation. This identification, if encouraged by the government, may hopefully lead to a civic identity which rejects racism and arbitrary ethnic division.

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