

## REVIEW PAPER

# THE INFLUENCE OF NATIONALISM AND REALISM ON SHAPING OF THE POLITICAL THOUGHT IN RUSSIA WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE PUTIN ERA

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## ABSTRACT

Nationalism as an idea, movement and ideology denotes tendency of members of an ethnic group towards the establishment of an ethnically pure territory. Achieving this political goal, with superiority in relation to others as a guiding idea, often leads to jeopardizing sovereignty and territorial integrity and oppression and exploitation of other people. Nationalism has been a significant feature of the Russian society for centuries. Traditionally, the focus of Russian nationalism has been the preservation and strengthening of a large and powerful multi-ethnic state. Opposed to this imperial nationalism stands ethno-nationalism focused on the struggle for the interests of ethnic Russians. One of the main drivers of the Russian nationalism in the past couple of decades has been the country's economic situation and the political tensions with the West. The Russian nationalist sentiment grew stronger after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of war in Ukraine, being justified with a strong nationalist political narrative focused on ethnic Russians and the protection of their rights. Contrary to nationalists, realists advocate a more pragmatic approach to international relations, focusing on economic and social development. The aim of this paper is to research to what extent nationalism and realism have shaped political thought in Russia.

**Keywords:** Russia, Vladimir Putin, nationalism, realism, ideology



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## Introduction

In order to fully understand Russian nationalism, one should start from the general concept of nationalism. Nationalism, in the broadest sense, denotes the superiority of one nation, which shares common values such as culture, tradition, language and religion, in relation to another and is often manifested by aggressiveness. Nationalism is manifested by the desire for all members of a certain ethnic group, or a nation, to share a common territory. In other words, the achievement of this political goal often comes at the expense of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country where a certain ethnic group lives as a minority. In case they are the majority, they seek to 'remove the different and less valuable', since nationalists are characterized by pronounced intolerance, which, in the most extreme form, can result in ethnic cleansing and genocide (Hobsbawm, 2022).

It goes without saying that the interests of the nation can be interpreted in various ways. However, satisfying national interests is possible at the expense of the nation itself and its resources or at the expense of other nations. In the first case, the people have a need primarily for freedom, independence, just government and the like, and in the second, the people who satisfy their needs at the expense of other peoples want to have power and the right to oppress and exploit other peoples for their own purposes (Vujačić & Radović, 2013). From this arise two types of nationalism. The first can be called national liberation, and the second imperialist. Of course, some combination is also possible: some nations may try to be independent from others, but at the same time they are ready to take away the freedom of another nation. In order to achieve that, different ideologies and combinations thereof are used (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2016).

Max Weber emphasizes that national consciousness, which is one of the foundations of nationalism, is a "common political destiny", and leads to the formation of communities based on common memories, which often have a stronger force than the ties of cultural, linguistic or community based common origin. They are the ones who "give the last decisive note to national consciousness" (Weber, 1994, p. 18) Weber further notes that the appeal of nationalism is far wider. One gets a sense of prestige for one begins to feel "ethnic honor", which is probably the only type of status superiority available to the masses, as Vujacic and Radovic (2013)

imply the specific honor of the masses because it is available to anyone who originally belongs to the community and believes in it subjectively.

According to Konstantin Krylov, nationalism is a general concept, and racism is one of the theories that relies on a certain type of nationalism. There is also "national socialism", "Nazism" (it is the same as "fascism") – an exotic type of racism. So, it can be said that every racist is a nationalist, but not every nationalist is a racist. Following this tendency, it can be concluded that every Nazi is a racist, but every racist is not a Nazi (Pain, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to determine more precisely what exactly nationalism is trying to convey (Sakwa, 2008). Nationalism claims that: 1) nations have interests (from which it follows that different nations can have different interests) and 2) every nation has the right and even must protect its interests in case they are violated – not only by other nations, but also by, say, the government or some social groups. As opposed to nationalism stands realism, which rejects ancient myths, historical mistakes and unrealistic imperialist ambitions, and accepts the real situation and endeavours to act accordingly. The focus of this paper is the relationship and struggle between these two ideologies.

## Early Russian Nationalism

The early beginnings of Russian nationalism can be found in the "Russian Party" movement from the 1950s, which was active until the end of the 1980s. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, another nationalist/fascist movement called "Russian National Unity" appeared on the Russian political scene, which did not last long, but still gave rise to several radical groups irresistibly reminiscent of modern neo-Nazi groups in Europe. It was these radical groups that encouraged the political activity of neo-Nazi skinheads, such as BORN, a military national-fascist organization, responsible for a dozen murders. The main political goal of these groups has been: 1) establishing of an ethnic Russian state, which would encompass territories in which the Russians have traditionally lived for centuries, and 2) the cancellation of the internal administrative division into republics, regions and regions, especially those with a majority Muslim population. In addition, Russian nationalists have a pronounced nostalgia for the Soviet Union, and advocate for a return to the borders of the USSR and the fight against Russophobia (Mendras, 2012; Tishkov, 1997).

In this context, thousands of Russian nationalist movements throughout the former Soviet Union propagate the restoration of the former Russian state, which led to the introduction of the concept of the "Russian World" and the provision of wholehearted assistance to such organizations. Although the focus of the world public has long been the traditional ethnic and religious nationalism, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, imperial nationalism with a strong nationalist-militaristic ideology has, very robustly and aggressively, entered the political scene, the type of nationalism which, in Putin's opinion, is "the most proper, most genuine, and most effective" nationalism (Mitrokhin, 2023, p. 1). This type of nationalism, often referred to as the territorial nationalism, advocates the protection of the rights of Russians in the former Soviet space and is based on hatred towards the leaders of the newly formed states since they embarked on the path of independence, separating from Mother Russia. The goal of this nationalism is to restore the former borders of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, there are many those who are ready to give their lives for this cause.

On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, in November 1990, Boris Yeltsin in a historic speech in Kiev announced the end of the 300-year rule of the Russian emperors and the Soviet totalitarian regime, further emphasizing that Russia will not neither determine nor dictate the future fate of Ukraine. In order to oppose Mikhail Gorbachev's attempts to preserve the Soviet Union<sup>1</sup>, Yeltsin strongly emphasized the oppressed position of Russians within the Soviet Union. In this context, he advocated the restoration of Russia through its liberation from the burden of other republics. Namely, after the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, they announced a merciless fight against inequality and Russian chauvinism, and the upliftment of oppressed peoples living in the periphery of the country (Zelikow, 2021). Unlike other republics, which enjoyed political sovereignty, and possessed their own cultural and educational institutions with their own language, Russia was the only Soviet republic that did not have its own academy of sciences, capital city, or communist party, because all of these overlapped with the Soviet ones.

The address of the Russian nationalist, Valentin Rasputin, at the session of the Congress of the Communist Party, held in May 1989, in which he expressed his open dissatisfaction with the treatment of Russia, did not remain without resonance among the public:

Perhaps it is Russia that should secede from the Union, since you accuse her of all your misfortunes and since her backwardness and awkwardness obstruct your progressive aspirations? ... We could then pronounce the word 'Russian' without fear of being rebuked for nationalism, we could talk openly about our national identity ... Believe me, we're fed up with being scapegoats, with being mocked and spat upon (Givens, 1996).

The long-standing Russian dissatisfaction coupled with the extremely difficult political and economic situation caused by Gorbachev's reforms resulted in the emergence of numerous separatist movements. Repression under Stalin and the war in Afghanistan further strengthened this sentiment. Dmitry Likhachev, a cultural historian who survived the Gulag said that the communist regime "humiliated and robbed Russia so much, that Russians can hardly breathe" (Riasanovsky, 1996, p. 143). Furthermore, Boris Yeltsin, who managed to mobilize a huge number of supporters, pointed out, *inter alia* that the Soviet Union has been subsidizing the countries of Central Asia for decades to the detriment of Russia. 'Enough feeding the other republics!<sup>2</sup> was wholeheartedly accepted Yeltsin's statement from 1990, followed by shouts against Mikhail Gorbachev. Yeltsin, in the spirit of realism, strongly advocated the spiritual, national and democratic (read pro-Western) awakening of Russia. The August 1991 failed coup attempt by the Communists further cemented Boris Yeltsin's position and paved the way for his election as the first President of the Russian Federation. Declaration of independence in the former Soviet republics soon followed, crushing Mikhail Gorbachev's dreams of revitalizing and preserving the Union (Neumeyer, 2022).

Today, nationalism is a significant feature of the Russian society and at the same time dominates public discourse. Its main feature is ethnic

<sup>1</sup> During Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost, every attempt by the Soviet republics to establish greater political and cultural autonomy was brutally thwarted. One of the well known examples were the large demonstrations in Tbilisi in April 1989, when Soviet troops suppressed the demonstrations with massive use of force and brutality. In his farewell speech, Gorbachev emphasized that one of his greatest concerns was that „the people in this country are no longer citizens of a great power“.

<sup>2</sup> The first Russian president who raised the status of Russians, within the Soviet Union, as first among equals, was Stalin. Nikita Khrushchev continued this commitment, especially due to the fact that the Russians were largely responsible for the victory over Nazi Germany. Russians have been given the status of 'big brother' especially in relation to the Caucasian peoples, with the Russian language as the official language and the dominance of Russian culture and history.

issues. This new ethno-nationalism comes in different forms, the most important of which are racism and xenophobia, as well as a new intellectual movement of 'national democracy' that tries to replicate conservative Western European nationalist forces. Traditionally, the focus of Russian nationalism has been the preservation and strengthening of a large and powerful multi-ethnic state capable of projecting its influence overseas, not so much racial purity and ethnic issues. These traditional nationalists were usually called 'statists' (*gosudarstvenniki*), while the pejorative term used for them was 'imperialists' (*impertsy*). Opposed to this type of nationalists are ethno-nationalists, whose focus is the struggle for the interests of ethnic Russians, and not so much the Russian state. What is curious is that these two groups are strongly opposed to each other to such an extent that they hate each other (Neumeyer, 2022).

### Russian National Interests in the Early 1990s and a Bitter Lesson in Political Realism

In the early 1990s, the new Russian state found itself in an extremely difficult situation, hyperinflation ate up savings, several million workers did not receive salaries for months, criminal structures took control of most of the economy, and industrial production collapsed. Energy supply has become a matter of national security and survival of the nation. "Russia was hit by probably the worst economic depression ever to hit the industrialized world" (Rywkin, 2008, p. 15). In addition, Russia lost its international status, and democratic reforms failed. In other words, instead of bringing progress, democracy has caused chaos and an even higher crime rate. As a result, people began to value order and stability more than freedom and democracy, longing for a strong leader who would reinstate order and restore Russia's great power status. Along with nostalgia for the Soviet Union, regret for the former Russian empire based on religion, autocracy and nationalism began to surface (Oliker, 2009).

Following the end of the Cold War, Russia, a country with a thousand-year tradition of imperial statehood, found itself in a political, ideological and identity vacuum. In these circumstances, Russian state and the Russian people learned an important lesson of political realism. Namely, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the former Soviet space turned these regions into a sphere of direct Euro-Atlantic influence (Lynch, 2001). Numerous internal eco-

nomie, political and social problems diverted Russia's attention from developing a coherent foreign policy. In order to obtain the status and privileges of the former Soviet Union, early admission to international institutions, partnership with the West and financial support for the economic revival of the country, Russia mainly supported and followed the foreign policy initiatives and decisions of the USA and the EU. In the words of Yevgeny Primakov: "Russia has become 'guided' through the waterway of United States politics" (Primakov 2010).

However, instead of building partnership relations and getting closer to Russia, transatlantic institutions continued to expand towards Russia, placing under its sphere of influence former Warsaw Pact members. Of particular concern was the expansion of NATO, which the Russians viewed as the American post-Cold War neo-containment doctrine, whose goal was the encirclement of Russia and its neutralization in the traditional spheres of influence. Moscow frequently felt humiliated and argued that its interests and goals were not being taken into account (Asmus, 2008). Therefore, instead of becoming democratic and cooperative, Russia became hostile and authoritarian. Russian conformism gradually faded away. Over time, this sentiment will grow into truly expansionist policies. In the second half of the 1990s, especially after Vladimir Putin came to power, the Russian state became stronger, its national interests and foreign policy priorities were clearly defined. Russia began to behave like the great power it had been in the tsarist era. Many passionate Russians started to support anti-Western foreign policy against what they called „Western arrogance“ (Galeotti, 2019).

When it comes to the development of the Russian political thought, it is important to note that the first Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, was elected in 1991 at a time when there were strong struggles between two political factions, one advocating change and the other that favored the preservation of the communist order. It was exactly Yeltsin who struck the final blow to the old communist system. In the same period, the former sources of legitimacy of the Russian government - ideology, the Communist Party and the army - slowly began to disappear. The only ideological aspect of Yeltsin's rule was anti-communism. During almost a decade of his rule, Yeltsin put significant efforts into making Russia's return to communism impossible (Melvin, 2022).

## Vladimir Putin's Realism and the Renewal of the Russian Nationalism

In early 2000, Vladimir Putin inherited a weak, corrupt and paralyzed state, on the verge of disintegration. Russian foreign policy was in shambles, relations with the West deteriorated, especially after the war in Kosovo. His strategic goal, from the very beginning, was to rebuild Russia and restore its former glory and power. By the end of his first term, Putin had revitalized the Russian national idea by restoring the Russian identity symbols of the Tsarist and the Soviet era. As during Imperial Russia, political culture was defined based on the trinity of religion, autocracy and nationalism (Mankoff, 2011) Russian foreign policy has undergone a dramatic evolution based on Russian national interests and the concept of multipolarity. Power, order and the re-establishment of Russia's international influence, rather than democracy and human rights, are the focus of the Kremlin's political thinking. The new concept of Russian national interests includes the preservation of Russia's historical sphere of influence (with special emphasis on the former Soviet space), respect for the rights and protection of ethnic Russians in the former Soviet republics, participation in the resolution of conflicts concerning Russian interests, and prevention of the establishing of anti-Russian blocs, both military as well as political, and active involvement in international economic activities (Tsygankov, 2018).

After a decade of weakness of the Russian state, in the first two terms of Putin's rule, Russia managed to return to the international scene, regaining influence in some part of the neighbourhood and beyond. Putin restored national pride and made Russia a great power again. The new Russian reality is characterized by intensified confrontational rhetoric towards the West. Russia developed a new national idea, based on religion and nationalism, emphasizing the country's unique path as a great power, rejecting Western values and their understanding of democracy and human rights. Indeed, the essential determinant of Putin's rule is the absence of democracy, xenophobia, control of the press and the restriction of basic human rights (Biryukov & Sergeev, 2018).

It is important to note that the Russian nationalism and realism were two ideologies that played an important role in shaping the country's political scene during Putin's rule. Nationalism in Russia is not a new phenomenon, and it has been a

powerful force for centuries. However, it has taken on new meaning and importance in recent years due to several factors, including the country's economic struggles, political tensions with the West, and rising social unrest (Soldatov & Rochlitz, 2018). One of the main drivers of the Russian nationalism in the past couple of decades has been the country's economic situation. Despite Russia's vast natural resources and wealth, the economy was struggling, with high inflation, low growth rates, international sanctions and a lack of investment. Nationalism provided a sense of pride and identity for many Russians, who felt that their country was under attack from outside forces. The Kremlin encouraged this sentiment, promoting the idea that Russia was a powerful and independent nation that needed to defend its interests against foreign powers (Mendras, 2012).

Realism, on the other hand, emphasized the need for practical solutions and a clear-eyed view of Russia's strengths and weaknesses. Realists argue that the country needs to focus on its core strengths, such as its military and energy resources, while addressing its weaknesses, such as corruption and a lack of innovation. Realists also recognize the importance of international relations, arguing that Russia needs to engage with other countries on a pragmatic basis. They believe that the country should focus on building partnerships with other countries that share its interests, rather than relying solely on its own strength (Soldatov & Rochlitz, 2018).

Both nationalism and realism had their champions in the Russian political establishment, being two important ideologies that shaped the country's political landscape. Nationalists, such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, emphasized the need for a strong leader who could defend the country's interests and restore its pride. Realists, such as Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, argued for a more pragmatic approach focused on economic and social development. Despite their differences, both nationalism and realism reflected the deep-seated concerns and anxieties of the Russian people. They also highlighted the country's complex relationship with the outside world, as Russia struggled to balance its desire for autonomy and independence with the realities of global interdependence (Pavlovskiy, 2016). While they had their differences, they both reflected the concerns and anxieties of the Russian people and highlighted the country's complex relationship with the outside world.

In the context of nationalism, Alexander Dugin occupies a special place, as a prominent philosopher, political thinker and leader of Russian nationalism, due to his strong influence on the development of political thought, philosophy, internal and external policy, but also nationalism in Russia thanks to his concept of Eurasianism and Fourth Political Theory. The former proposes a distinctive cultural, political, and economic identity for Russia that rejects Western liberal democratic standards and highlights Russia's geopolitical uniqueness as a bridge between Europe and Asia (Dugin, 2012). The latter is an appeal for Russia to establish its own intellectual path consistent with its distinctive Eurasian identity, in defiance of the dominant political doctrines of liberal democracy, communism, and fascism. Dugin's ideas have made him a powerful figure in Russian politics, and they have contributed to a revival of Russian nationalism by shaping policy, social values, and the national consciousness (Clover, 2016).

The emphasis on each of these ideologies shifted slightly in response to the changing political and economic climate. Nationalism remained a powerful force in Russia, as many citizens continued to feel a sense of pride and loyalty to their country. However, there was a growing recognition that Russia needed to be more pragmatic in its approach to international relations, particularly in light of the country's economic struggles and the ongoing war in Ukraine. Realism gained greater prominence a decade ago, as the country's leaders began to recognize the importance of addressing Russia's economic weaknesses and building stronger ties with other countries. The government launched a series of economic reforms aimed at modernizing the economy and attracting foreign investment. This included efforts to reduce corruption, promote innovation, and diversify the economy away from its reliance on oil and gas exports (Galeotti, 2019).

At the same time, Russian leaders recognized the need for more constructive engagement with the international community. President Vladimir Putin called for a "reset" in relations with the United States, and the government worked to improve relations with other countries, including China, India, and Germany. Despite these efforts, tensions between Russia and the West continued to simmer, particularly following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Nationalists within Russia saw this as evidence of a broader effort to contain and undermine Russia, and they pushed for a more confrontational

stance towards the West (Biryukov & Sergeyev, 2018). Realists, on the other hand, emphasized the need for a more refined approach. They recognized that Russia's economic and political interests were deeply intertwined with those of other countries, and they argued for a more cooperative approach that focused on building partnerships and resolving conflicts through dialogue.

Russian politics in the last ten years was marked by a series of significant events and changes. The period saw a shift in the country's political landscape, as well as a growing recognition of the need for economic and political reform. In 2012, Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency for a third term after serving as prime minister for four years. This sparked widespread protests across Russia, as many citizens expressed frustration with what they saw as a lack of political freedom and democratic institutions. Despite the protests, Putin maintained a firm grip on power, and his government pursued a series of policies aimed at bolstering Russia's position in the international community. This included a greater emphasis on nationalism and a more assertive foreign policy, particularly in relation to the crisis in Syria (Marten, 2017).

The government also recognized the need for economic reform, as Russian economy faced with myriad economic challenges. The government launched a series of economic reforms aimed at modernizing the economy and promoting innovation, although progress was slow. The tensions between Russia and the West escalated in the wake of the Crimea annexation. This led to the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia by the United States and the European Union, which had significant negative consequences on the country's economy. In response, the government launched a series of measures aimed at reducing Russia's reliance on the West and building stronger ties with other countries, particularly China. This included a major gas deal with China, as well as efforts to improve relations with other countries, such as Germany and India (Szostek & Hutchings, 2015).

While the government maintained a firm grip on power and pursued a more assertive foreign policy, there was also a growing recognition of the need for economic and political reform. Putin's government faced increasing criticism from civil society groups, who pushed for greater political freedom and an end to corruption (Soldatov & Rochlitz, 2018). The 2020 constitutional amendments

provided a chance for various players to pursue their conceptions of national identity, resulting in yet another, if relative, triumph for those, within the establishment, who wish to push the ethnic Russian nationalist political agenda. While members of the working group with opposing viewpoints were underrepresented, their victory was made possible by the constitution itself. The amendments will undoubtedly impact Russian politics in profound ways for many years to come.

The Russian nationalism became stronger with the rise of Putin's ambitions, and annexation of Crimea, which was exactly done under the shield of uniting all Russian speaking people under one roof and historical pretext of land possession. The takeover of Crimea is still framed as repairing a past mistake. The majority of Russians regard the annexation as an important achievement, and since 2014, Russian military pride and the country's global influence have grown. The Crimea motif has been widely used by governmental authorities. The nationalist ambitions only grew bigger with war which started in 2022 against Ukraine. In the beginning of 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin came forward with the ideas of a series of constitutional modifications aimed at ensuring his authority in the years ahead. Simultaneously, the modifications permitted ideological perspectives on national identity to be included into the Constitution (Szostek & Hutchings, 2015).

Since the summer 2020, the Russian language has gained symbolic importance as not just the official language but also the language of all people who can speak it, implicitly referred to as those who founded the state. These provisions, which included support for compatriots out of the Russian borders, continue the shift in Russia's nation-building from a civic to an ethnic vision of nation, challenging existing thoughts of borders of the country. Many governmental actions were made between 2012 and 2019 to protect the "right" interpretations of the past, reflecting the rising importance of the successful country narrative (Biryukov & Sergejev, 2018). For example, state authorities described the accepted forms of commemorating the Great Patriotic War. Putin approved legislation in May 2014 that criminalizes the revival of Nazism, the public degradation of monuments of Russian military pride, and the dissemination of false information about the country's defense. In the presidential world, reminiscing the past has a morally obligatory component: it is the responsibility and moral duty

of the current generation to understand their place in the line of generations that came before them. The story of the triumphant country connects to the notion of patriotic allegiance in this way.

In spring of 2014, as a response to the Euromaidan upheaval in Kyiv, the Kremlin embraced far stronger Russian nationalist rhetoric. The annexation of Crimea was justified to the Russian people in radical nationalist terms. Putin's popularity has risen dramatically since the onset of the crisis. Interestingly, in terms of Russia's two dominant types of nationalism – imperial nationalism and ethnonationalism – the annexation of Crimea made it possible for Putin to sit on two chairs: because the peninsula's population is primarily ethnic Russians, this act could be presented as both uniting the Russian lands in a powerful Russian state and a protection of ethnic Russians who are located out of Russian borders (Perovich, 2014).

On March 18, 2014, the same day the Crimea was annexed, Putin gave a speech in the Russian Duma, the focus of which was the justification of this act of aggression. Some of the arguments presented fall into the category of traditional political narrative, such as the need to preserve a strong Russian state and dissatisfaction with the arbitrariness and hypocrisy of the Western world. However, the novelty in this speech was the reference to the Russian people as an ethnic entity, emphasizing how "Russian people have become one of the largest divided nations in the world, if not the largest" (Putin, 2014), clearly emphasizing ethnic Russians, and not the multi-ethnic peoples of Russia. It is interesting that the term he used '*ruskii narod*' is a term that until then had been used only in an ethnic sense, not in the sense of a political nation for which the term '*rosiiskii narod*' was used (Kolsto & Blakkisrud, 2016). Putin's annexation of Crimea resulted in record public support.

Furthermore, immediately prior to authorizing the Russian military forces to invade Ukraine, Vladimir Putin made a statement giving forth what he said to be the historical grounds for this "special operation". This is a version of the thesis that Ukrainians ("Little Russians"), Byelorussians ("White Russians"), and Russians ("Great Russians") have been, and continue to be, fundamentally one country connected by blood and culture since the period of "Kyivan Rus" (Breuilly & Halikiopoulou, 2022). To comprehend Russia's invasion of Ukraine, researchers must consider many aspects of nation-

alism that fuel this war. Beginning with Russian imperial nationalist ideas to Ukraine's mobilization and battle for survival, contradictory national narratives and the conflicts that underpin them have been produced and continue to be moulded by the current international order (Breuilly & Halikiopoulou, 2022).

## Conclusion

The setting for the emergence of Russian nationalism was a state that, in demographic terms, was significantly more Russian than it had been before to 1991. After the Soviet Union disintegrated, the proportion of ethnic Russians increased from just over 50% in the USSR to 81% in Russia. Observers noted that Russia now had the opportunity, for the first time ever, to evolve into a "nation-state" based on a high degree of shared identity and values (Tishkov, 1997). To embody this new non-ethnic national notion, the names 'rossiiskii' and 'rossiiane' – non-ethnic words for 'Russian' and 'Russians' – were introduced. Yet, twenty years later, the endeavour to construct a rossiiskii country appears to have been abandoned for all practical purposes. The term "rossiiane" is connected to the Eltsin era, and it has been abandoned, along with shock treatment, the oligarch economy, and other parts of the failed transition to Western-style pluralist ideals and ideology of liberalism. Although the 'national question' remains a simmering issue, government under Vladimir Putin has effectively centralized the Federation and disempowered the influence of the republics' powerful non-Russian elites (Tishkov, 1997).

Putin's understanding of domestic, foreign and security policy goes along with the school of realism, often showing signs of open opportunism and calculation. The aggression against Ukraine was motivated by strong ethno-nationalism, i.e., in his opinion, the need to protect ethnic Russians from criminal policies in Ukraine, carried out by Ukrainian neo-Nazis and nationalists, whose activities experienced a kind of boom after Yanukovich's departure from power in 2014. The protection of Russians in the former Soviet space, 25 million of them, has been a clearly articulated goal of Russian foreign policy since the beginning of the 1990s and is an important determinant of Russia's relations with neighbouring countries. However, despite the strong rhetoric, Russia lacked the capacity and resources to significantly help ethnic Russians in the diaspora. All the fraternal help and support eventually came down to granting dual citizenship, organizing vari-

ous associations, and spreading cultural influence through the formation of the "Russian World". However, in some cases concern for the brothers took on a strong security feature, which is especially reflected in the case of the Russian military intervention in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which was justified by the need to protect the Russians in these parts of Georgia. Russian dissatisfaction was further intensified due to the expansion of NATO and the EU and the practical encirclement of Russian territory, which awakened age-old fears (Melvin, 2022).

Nationalism has been one of the biggest and most consistent sources of national pride in Russian history. After all, Vladimir Putin, at the Valdai Forum in 2018, called himself "the most proper, most genuine, and most effective nationalist." (Mitrokhin, 2023) The morally obligatory elements of the political narrative have recently been emphasized by the state authorities, who have even modified several state policies as a result. Issues with the state's legitimacy persist even with the new, ideologically strengthened Constitution. Still, Russian imperial aspirations may seem to have existed forever. Even somewhat educated media frequently portrays the Kremlin's desire to rule over its neighbours as having shifted from the tsars to Stalin and then to Putin. It is important to keep in mind that Russia rejected empire. In actuality, the USSR was brought down in 1990–1991 by Russian secessionism, along with separatist movements in the republics. Yeltsin merged the interests of Russia's conservative nationalists and liberal democrats through an uneasy coalition in order to reject Mikhail Gorbachev's bid to maintain the union. Yeltsin argued that Russians, the majority people in the Soviet Union, was oppressed. To revitalize Russia, he urged independence from burdensome others.

To conclude, nationalism is deeply rooted in Russians and the Russian contemporary leadership does not lag behind in following nationalist ambitions of their predecessors. And there seems to be no attempts to lower these ambitions. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia's foreign policy goals were determined by the desire to compensate for the loss of its superpower status, baffled national identity, and a hurt national pride. As Russia continues to grapple with economic and political challenges, the ideologies will likely continue to play an important role in shaping the country's future. Finally, Russian nationalism and realism continue to play important roles in the country's politics, although the emphasis on each of these

ideologies shifted slightly in response to changing circumstances. While nationalism remains a powerful force, there was a growing recognition of the need for a more pragmatic and cooperative approach to international relations, as Russia sought to address its economic challenges and build stronger ties with other countries.

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