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***NATIONAL IDENTITY, NATIONALIST DISCOURSE AND  
THE IMAGINED NATION IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA***



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# DECLARATION

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution. In accordance with Department guidelines, this thesis is does not exceed 100,000 words.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to account for post-Soviet Russian national identity and nationalism ‘from below’, employing the ‘thick descriptions’ of the nation reproduced by ordinary Russians across social and generational lines. It examines the current equilibrium in mainstream nationalist hegemonic discourse, shedding light on the vitality of the nation as an ‘imagined community’. In doing this, nationalism is viewed as a set of discursive formations that make claims about how or what the nation is or should be. A central aim in this research is to highlight what discursive constructions are shared or contested across a representative sample of the Russian population.

In order to offer a meaningful assessment of nationalist discourse, this research employs ethnographic fieldwork driven by a grounded theory approach. With fifteen months of fieldwork in three Russian cities, this permitted room for exploration and significant redirection of the research focus. This helped reveal the interconnections between certain common, foundational elements of national identity and the structure of a dominant nationalist discourse. Previous research has often focused on the challenges of Russian nation-building given the complicated heritage bestowed by the Romanov and Soviet empires. This research has identified certain historical and cultural factors vital to the shaping of Russian national identity today. It also identifies a current hegemonic nationalist discourse and unpacks how it is relevant to the majority. This dominant discourse is built on certain myths and versions of normality, much of which takes the late Soviet as ‘normal’ and the wild nineties as ‘abnormal’.

This research also explores how the above is contested. The thesis argues that, at the current moment, the challenge of anti-hegemonic nationalist discourses is, for many people, neutralised by the appeal of a particular geopolitical vision. This research outlines how visions of the nation are weaved into commonly shared notions of identity and underlines how the current *status quo* is held together.

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## Introduction

Russia stands out as a fascinating case in studying national identity; not only is she the largest country on earth, but has historically played a changing role in world affairs, at times part of the developed core of Western nations, at times excluded to the periphery. In Trotsky's term, the West acted as a 'whip of external necessity' on nineteenth century Russia, forcing the country down a development path determined elsewhere (Trotsky 1980: 4). Soviet modernisation sought to overcome this historic backwardness and even surpass the West. With the closing of a phase of disorder following the collapse of the USSR, Russia has experienced relative stabilization under President Vladimir Putin. A new environment, which combines older Soviet-born and younger post-Soviet-born people, has provided the space for a post-Soviet Russian national identity to germinate and blossom.

Today, the Russian leadership is faced with multiple challenges related to national identity and nationalism. Unlike the Soviet state, the Russian Federation has an ethno-cultural core with an outright majority ('ethnic' Russians make up 80% of the population). Integrating the remaining 'non-Russian' twenty percent remains an important challenge; can a form of national identity be found to encourage both the idea of Russia as a multi-ethnic state *and* a Russia as a state for the ethnic Russians? As was the case historically, nationalism remains both a resource and a threat to the Russian state. Russia's post-Soviet leaders have not been shy to employ nationalism as a resource to achieve popular legitimacy and consolidate support among the population. At the same time, nationalism is a threat to the Russian authorities in a variety of ways. This includes liberal and nationalist demands for democratic reform and an end to corruption, nationalist separatist movements within the Russian Federation demanding independence or autonomy, and xenophobic sentiment in the population that contradicts state efforts to promote multi-ethnic peace. Recent shifts in Russian foreign policy initiatives in Syria and Ukraine should also be understood within a context of changing nationalist discourse and identity within the country. This thesis sets out to examine and explain the

phenomenon of the post-Soviet Russian nation. It is important from the outset, however, to elaborate on the adjective ‘post-Soviet’.<sup>1</sup>

### *Unpacking the ‘post-Soviet’*

In this thesis, ‘post-Soviet’ refers to three ‘postings’ that have been on-going since the collapse of the USSR. Firstly, there is ‘post-communism’ or ‘post-socialism’, the ambiguous social reconfiguration that occurred ‘once the means of production were privatized and the Party’s political monopoly disestablished’ (Chari, Verdery 2009:11). Central to this is the progress of Russia’s ‘first post-socialist generation’, who grew up in conditions where ‘traces of Soviet life’ ‘still abound (Buckler 2009: 260). Thus, post-socialism explores how Soviet legacies play out in Russian society (Stenning 2008: 325). In searching for the footprints of the fabled ‘Soviet man’, we look for evidence of his eradication or reproduction across the transmission belt of Russian generations, attempting to determine what kind of transition is underway.

The second key element of ‘post-Soviet’ concerns Russia’s post-imperial transitions. Following the collapse of the USSR, much of the post-Soviet space experienced a form of ‘de-colonisation’ in the move to national independence. The fall of the imperial centre was also, in some ways, an ‘escape’ for Russians themselves, albeit a rather tortured and ambiguous one. The key question here is how the demise of a large imperial unit affects the identity of the ‘imperial’ nation. The focus of much postcolonial literature is on the ‘colonized nations’ of the Tsarist empire and the Soviet Union. This, however, neglects tracing the potential ‘decolonisation’ of the ‘imperial centre’, which can be a long-term process requiring generations. Vyacheslav Morozov (2013, 2015) has argued that today’s Russia possesses a ‘hybrid identity’ that is both ‘imperial’ in its efforts to dominate the post-Soviet space and ‘anti-imperial’ in its opposition to American unilateralism on the global stage. In this sense there is strong continuity with the Soviet empire, which integrated ‘brother nations’ into one space while combating American imperialism. The end of the Soviet project has not necessarily brought with it a corresponding revolution in the Russian ‘imperial consciousness’. As with Britain and France after 1945, the

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed elucidation of the key research paradigms employed to study the post-Soviet space see Grzegorz Ekiert’s 2014 article ‘Three Generations of Research on Post Communist Politics’.

acceptance of the 'end of empire' and reduced great power status is no straightforward matter.

The third element concerns how the world has evolved since the breakdown of the 'three worlds system' of the Cold War (Stenning, Horschelmann 2008: 320). For some, the collapse of the 'second' world has removed the non-Western alternative to modernity, leading Francis Fukuyama (1992) to declare the 'end of history' and the triumph of democratic and liberal value systems. This has led to a research paradigm of 'transition' that views the post-Soviet as gradually being absorbed into a neo-liberal order in conditions of globalization. Yet, for post-Soviet Russia, neo-liberalism has involved 'impoverishment and degradation' as 'entitlements are withdrawn, bodies are commodified and then devalued, and the former socialist welfare states abandon all pretences at providing a social wage' (Chari, Vedery 2009: 15). Thus, an important part of the 'post-Soviet' is the experience of marginalisation and disintegration alongside the imposition of neo-liberalism and the end of the Cold War. Russia's new assertiveness in today's global politics and her return to the role of America's main protagonist suggest certain post-Cold War transitions have failed and previous pathways reactivated.

Keeping the above three 'postings' in mind, this study examines the changing meanings and appeal of mainstream Russian nationalism and national identity through a cross-generational data sample. In considering change and continuity between the last Soviet-Russian youth generation and the first post-Soviet youth generation, I look to reveal the complexities of being Russian in today's world. Today, Russia faces demographic crisis, rising immigration and economic pressures, as well as the battle to retain a great-power role in world affairs. Thus, the question of which vision of the Russian 'nation' achieves hegemonic status is vital. With a shift at both the level of leadership, and at the level of the public, from a generation born in the Soviet Union to one increasingly with no lived experience of socialism, there are serious questions as to how Russian national identity will be defined over the next twenty-five years, especially in a post-Putin context.

### *Theoretical approach and main argumentation*

This thesis studies how the nation is reproduced and contested in contemporary Russia. Eric Hobsbawm (1990: 10) asserted that, although nationalism is constructed from above, it must be studied ‘from below’ as this is where it takes root and is most powerful, volatile and significant. This thesis takes the position that the ‘nation’ is absorbed, reproduced and transmitted in the form of discursive formations. A large part of this work is done by ‘myths’: emotional, dramatic and simplified narratives that reveal much about ‘us’ and ‘them’. They also reveal what is ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’. Thus, the ‘nation’ can be understood as a way of thinking and talking that is shared across a large space by people of diverse backgrounds. This thesis makes an important contribution literature on Russia national identity and nationalism by shedding light on the picture ‘from below’, utilising ‘thick descriptions’ of the nation as it exists in the minds of ordinary Russians. In order to do this I employ an ethnographic approach involving fifteen months of fieldwork in three Russian cities and almost one-hundred interviews. In essence I was driven by three research questions.

- What are the important shared components of Russian national identity between different social and age groups?
- Can a dominant mainstream form of nationalism be identified, what are its key elements and how does it relate to national identity?
- What are the proportions of civic, ethnic and imperial in mainstream Russian nationalism and what role do Soviet legacies play?

Offering answers to these research questions demanded a number of things. Firstly, it was important to find a valid way to access national identity in the thoughts and feelings of ordinary people. Secondly, efforts must be made to trace state-led discourse in terms of key speeches, policies and media output, partly so that it is possible to recognise what elements are reproduced, transformed, ignored or contested. Thirdly, the direction of this research is highly explorative; no narrowly pre-determined hypothesis was established and, through employing a ‘grounded theory’ approach, the data was allowed to

‘speak’ and redirect the research focus in important ways that will be explored below.

In examining Russian national-feeling, I argue that Russian national identity, which is shaped by historical, cultural and social factors, interacts with dominant ways of talking about the nation, in other words, a *hegemonic nationalist discourse*. In examining this dynamic, it is important to underline that discourses about the nation are fluid and contested; the central challenge of this thesis was to explore what kind of equilibrium exists in Russia today. This thesis has discovered that, to a large degree, Russian national identity is strongly shaped by three key elements. These are Soviet legacies, refashioned pre-Soviet trends and the experience and memory of Russia’s traumatic transition (1988-1998). The sentiments emerging from these three elements are managed and manipulated ‘from above’ and reproduced ‘from below’ to produce a dominant nationalist discourse that is acceptable to a majority of the population. This discourse can be characterised as fundamentally conservative with important neo-Slavophile and Soviet-infused elements. It revolves around the restoration of ‘normality’ in both socio-economic conditions and foreign relations. While the discourse of the majority is stable and successfully reproduced across generational and social lines, we cannot view Russian society as a monolithic entity. Hegemonic discourse is effectively challenged by a large and diverse minority that holds fundamentally different versions of what is ‘normal’ for Russia. The elements to this anti-hegemonic discourse are diverse, ranging from liberals and Westerniser sentiment to populist ‘Put Russia first’ nationalism and isolationism. This thesis argues that what ultimately keeps the anti-hegemonic discourses in check is not any new ideology, religion or neo-traditionalism but the powerful mobilising effects of geopolitical visions combined with the persistent survival of Soviet ways of thinking in the population at large.

### ***Structure of the thesis***

In order to unpack the above argument, the thesis will employ the following structure. Chapter One will examine some of the theories behind nation-ness and outline why nation should be understood as a set of claim-making

discourses. This involves a careful review of how nation, nationalism and national identity can be defined and, more importantly for this thesis, how they are interrelated. One of the theoretical lynchpins of this thesis is that nationalist discourse is comprised of a series of interlinked but distinct claims that are mainly transmitted through the vehicles of myths and visions of ‘normality’. In accounting for the reproduction and transmission of the nation ‘from below’ I examine the role of emotion and the fundamental urges the human mind displays to categorise into ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’.

Chapter Two builds on this theoretical discussion by outlining the logic behind my methodological approach. After clarifying the ontological and epistemological assumptions behind the research, I now discuss how I employed grounded theory as part of an ethnographic approach. Validity in qualitative research is largely grounded in transparency and openness in the path taken by the researcher. In this chapter I also reveal some of the challenges in conducting fieldwork in a foreign language, both in terms of linguistics, logistics and one’s own identity. In doing this I shed light on how the researcher and the research evolved before, during and after fieldwork, leaving an accessible account for those considering similar avenues in the study of identity and nation.

Chapter Three considers the specific historical circumstances behind the formation of the modern Russian ‘nation’, covering pre-Soviet and Soviet nation-building and outlining important trends and tendencies within this. These, in turn, are important to the overall argument of the thesis and are referred to in the empirical chapters. This is particularly the case with the creation of *Homo Sovieticus* (The Soviet person), a sociological entity of some importance to this thesis. The second part of the chapter will turn to post-Soviet nation building, offering a review of state policy and discourses from 1991 to the present. Elements of Russian mainstream nationalism promoted ‘from above’ will be examined, underlining the shift toward neo-Slavophile narratives, the dominance of statist (*gosudarstvennik*)<sup>2</sup> language and conservatism. This is combined with reluctance to outline any kind of state

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<sup>2</sup> *Gosudarstvennik* is a challenging word to translate, in thesis by ‘statist’ I mean a proponent of strong state or an advocate for the preservation of a unified and powerful state.

ideology and a strong reliance on using the West as the constituent ‘Other’ for Russian identity.

Following this, there are four empirical chapters in this thesis, each of which consider a distinct nationalist claim-making area. In Chapter Four I focus on historical memory, revealing that yearnings for stability and order tend to predominate in selecting positive periods of Russia’s past. A popular *longue durée* version of Russian history was uncovered that is connected to cycles of relative peace and progress followed by downward trajectories of collapse and chaos. Elements of this *longue durée* clearly connect to national identity today and justify certain political stances. Above all, the period of 1988-1998 is clearly important in shaping these views and influencing how people conceptualise the past. This chapter also offers an examination of Soviet periods, revealing strong contestation of the Stalin and Brezhnev periods due to strong splits in normative standards when looking at these periods.

Chapter Five turns to how the lines of inclusion and exclusion into the Russian ‘we’ are formed and maintained. This examines how far state-driven rhetoric on citizenship, nationality and patriotism have penetrated through to ordinary people, revealing some key elements of what being Russian means today. This includes ways of thinking from the Soviet period that have not been seriously challenged, leaving Russia with a very distinctive kind of ‘multiculturalism’. Exploring the lines of contention in this, the chapter also examines who tends to be excluded from the Russian ‘we’ and what this entails for mainstream nationalism. Here the proportions of ethnic, civic and imperial nationalism in Russian national identity are examined in some detail, leading to conclusions on the current *status quo*.

Chapter Six moves the focus to how people understand the political system in which they live, exploring how trust in and legitimacy of the leader compensate for widespread dissatisfaction with socio-economic conditions and corruption. Vladimir Putin’s powerful appeal is examined with reference to myths about his character and image. These in turn are linked to certain representations of Russians as a people being ‘enduring’, ‘passive’ or ‘paternalistic’. Of real importance is how lived experience of politics and

change in the reform period (1988-1998) informs stances today, making detachment from politics ‘normal’. The chapter also reveals how differing frames of normality emerge in those respondents who reject, criticise or lampoon the pro-Putin consensus. Attitudes to the ‘Information War’ reinforce the impression that, behind the façade of ninety percent approval ratings, serious polarisation and divisions exist in Russian society over a range of political, social and cultural issues.

In Chapter Seven, I account for the powerful appeal of geopolitics in Russian national identity. Here it will be argued that great power nationalism allows Russians to ‘live’ the nation in real-time. The state-promoted narrative of Russia locked in a just struggle for basic recognition of rights with the West clearly appeals to a large number. The chapter explains why this is the case, highlighting the centrality of an emotional narrative of *ressentiment* alongside the continued appeal of Soviet-influenced markers of greatness. In addition, the role of certain mobilising events is examined, revealing how it can pull together people who would otherwise waver in their support for the current *status quo*.



## Chapter One

### Theoretical Approaches to Understanding the Nation, National Identity and Nationalism.

*A man does not have himself killed for a half-pence a day or for a petty distinction. You must speak to the soul in order to electrify the man.*

Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>3</sup>

#### Introduction

In our daily lives we are surrounded by a plethora of national symbols and images; the language of the nation is reproduced and transmitted in a multitude of diverse ways on a daily basis. In researching the ‘nation’, a number of pitfalls face the intrepid explorer. One is the temptation to hunt for the Holy Grail: a singular, graspable, essential and ‘true’ national identity. Another is the tendency to talk of clean, distinct typologies of ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’. This thesis does not wish to offer an essentialist account of the nation, examples of which abound in history, from Herodotus’s depiction of an effeminate Egypt, to Huntington’s claims of an immutable Islamic civilizational identity (Roberts 2011; Huntington 1996). National identity is made up of components that are, at any given time, subject to a variety of competing or reinforcing identity projects that talk in terms of ‘nation’ and ‘country’. Nationalism is more than just a political doctrine; it is a force that influences lives far beyond this, shaping the very social reality in which we live. Given this multiplicity, the challenges of attempting to reveal the essence of nation-ness is a daunting prospect. Academic work on nationalism often produces rather dry standard definitions, equating nationhood with a checklist including common language, territory, past, as well as the common acceptance of rituals, symbols and national tradition (Hastings 1997, Smith 1991). The problem with these definitions and the debates emerging from them is that they do little to help us understand the intense passions produced by nationalism, which find its ultimate expression in the willingness to ‘die for one’s country’.

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<sup>3</sup> Napoleon: Master of Europe 1805-1807. A. Horne. (1979) Phoenix

That is not to say nationalism should be purely viewed in terms of the frenzied and fanatical states it can inspire. As Michael Billig (1995) convincingly argued, nationalism can be a ‘banal’ and barely noticeable force, reproduced in everyday manifestations. Ernest Gellner (1994: xi) viewed nationalism as ‘like gravity, an important and persuasive force, but not, at *most* times, strong enough to be violently disruptive’. To understand the ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ phases of nation-feeling, we need to examine how it is experienced in everyday life. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1983: 10) pointed out, nationalism ‘cannot be understood unless also analysed *from below*, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist’. Nation-feeling is both a result of the conscious intellectual and political labour of a variety of actors ‘from above’, and the reflection of sentiments and aspirations of ordinary people ‘from below’.

This thesis aims to remedy a certain defect in studies of nationalism, namely the preference in much constructivist research for examining the nation ‘from above’ through the study of ‘elites’. This tendency to focus on the nation’s plainly visible actors such as political entrepreneurs, high-level state figure or public intellectuals, entails the neglect of the picture ‘from below’: how ordinary people absorb and reproduce the ‘nation’. This concerns how people live the ‘nation’; how they think, talk and feel about themselves, both as individuals and as part of a wider community. Central to the nation’s appeal is the way it engages the heart and the head, reason and emotion, passion and pragmatism.

In accounting for the transformative power of nation, national identity and nationalism we must uncover ‘the processes and mechanisms’ behind those moments when nation-ness can ‘crystallise as a powerful, compelling reality’ (Brubaker, Cooper 2000: 5). In order to examine how national-feeling works ‘from below’, this chapter has two main sections. Firstly, I will argue claim-making is central to building the dominant, hegemonic discourse on the nation. Viewing ‘nation’, ‘nationalism’ and ‘national identity’ as interlinked, I will underline the salience of discursive formations in ensuring nationalism is fluid and adaptable to evolving external conditions. In this section I will also discuss

two typologies in nationalism that cause confusion and clarify my own position on these questions. In the second section, I will argue that three important factors should be considered in the reproduction of nationalism's discursive formations. Firstly, social psychology reveals how different members of a disparate group can share emotional states, something referred to as the 'collective self'. Secondly, I examine two essential means of transmitting discursive formations: myths and visions of normality. Thirdly, I outline why the generational factor should be kept in mind as a key driver in the evolution (and potentially rapid change) of nationalist discourse.

## **Part one: Defining the nation, national identity and nationalism**

### *Defining the nation*

A large amount of ink has been spilled in answering two interlinked questions: 'What is the nation?' and 'When is the nation'. Competing schools have offered convincing answers. On the one hand, 'perennialists' or 'ethno-symbolists' such as Anthony Smith (1991) and Liah Greenfeld (1992) presented the nation as something with deep roots that has been renewed over the centuries. According to this version, the nation is the product of welding various peoples into one unit 'based on the cultural heritage of the dominant ethnic core' (Smith 1991: 68); a process that in some cases can be traced back to the early Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, 'modernists' or 'constructivists' (E. Gellner, E. Hobsbawm, B. Anderson) view the nation as a social construct emerging from modernisation. Gellner (1983: 48) rejected the idea of 'sleeping-beauty nations': that the nation-state is the reawakening of the 'eternal' national unit. Instead, he viewed it as a patently new form of social organisation that replaced pre-existing cultural, social and religious structures. In this sense the nation is an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) that emerges to replace the old, fractured 'real' communities of the pre-industrial eras. It is an invented community as it is based on shared beliefs of common descent in conditions of newly achieved urbanisation and literacy.

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<sup>4</sup> A third group, the 'primordialists', treat the nation in an essentialist fashion, something that always has and will exist, a fixed, unchanging entity. This theoretical stance was popular in USSR, starting with Stalin through to Lev Gumilev, including Yulian Bromley and other Soviet academics who equated nation with the immutable '*ethnos*'.

For the purposes of this thesis, the modernist/perennialist debate is not of central importance. Regardless of whether the nation has endured throughout time or only the modern era, the challenge remains to account for the nation's enduring appeal today. In any case, a consensus has emerged that views the nation as both 'constructed' and 'historically contingent'. As Rogers Brubaker (2009: 28) noted, 'few if any scholars would argue that ethnic groups or races or nations are fixed or given; virtually everyone agrees that they are historically emergent and in some respects mutable'. Yet, attempting to compile an exhaustive list of criteria for what constitutes a nation is perhaps impossible. Given the vast diversity of 'nations' and the constantly changing conditions of societies across the globe, national identity and nationalism constantly take new forms, often in ways that invalidate carefully elaborated definitions. One reason for this is the nation is always up for debate. As Rosa Luxemburg pointed out, the nation consists of a series of questions that can never be definitively answered, such as:

*Who is the 'nation' and who has the authority and the 'right' to speak for the 'nation' and express its will? How can we find out what the 'nation' actually wants? Does there exist one political party which would not claim that it alone, among all others, truly expresses the will of the 'nation' whereas all other parties give only perverted and false expressions of the national will? (Luxemburg 1976: 141)*

Rather than searching for Stalin's primordial nation of 'real', 'common' features, we are better served to hunt for the key components of how ordinary people 'imagine' and talk about the nation. This, as Luxemburg suggests above, means putting the nation in inverted commas and admitting the plurality of forces attempting to interpret, hijack, exploit or reflect the 'nation'. Our key task is to evaluate how the general population responds to these efforts. According to Craig Calhoun (2007: 123), the goal is to unveil the 'factors that lead to the continual production and reproduction of nationalism as a central discursive formation in the modern world'. Such an approach allows us to define the nation as 'a particular way of thinking about what means to be a people' (Calhoun 1997: 6). Thinking about 'how we are as a people' is a fluid and contested process; several concrete versions of the nation can struggle for

hegemony within any specific context. The nation as a 'way of thinking' is heavily shaped by nationalist discourse, which produces a series of claims about what the nation is or should be. This is, in turn, linked to national identity: a way of conceptualising the self and others within an imagined national community. It is to this we will now turn in more detail.

### *National identity*

Thus, national identity is both a changing entity subject to much construction, and also contingent to certain historical, cultural and social factors. Rogers Brubaker (2004: 31) warned against assuming the salience of national or ethnic identities, which he called 'groupism'. Instead of treating nation-ness and ethnicity as a 'category of analysis', he advocates tracing certain 'categories of practice' of the nation emerging from 'everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors'. In this the sense of 'us' versus 'them' is vital to national identity, as the 'very notion of identity presumes an other from whom one is different' (Spencer, Wollman 2002: 57). The formation of group identity includes a categorising of those close enough to be included and those so different they should be excluded. In this 'external identification' it is clear the modern state is hugely influential; it has the wherewithal to create and support key categories in classifying groups (Brubaker 2004: 42). Yet, at the same time, the state is not an all-powerful deity; implementation can be messy and ordinary people can resist, ignore, transform or subvert the messages transmitted from above.

For the purposes of this thesis, having a national identity 'is to possess ways of thinking about nationhood' (Billig 1995: 8) and community, including how we conceive of 'us' and 'them', 'our destiny' versus that of the 'outside world' (ibid: 4). R. G. Suny (1999: 144) developed this further claiming 'identities are embedded in the stories we tell about ourselves individually and collectively (...) the way individuals and groups talk and give meaning to their being, their selves, their roles'. These stories are full of claims that, when taken together, form the basis of national identity. Thus, national identity can be defined as ways of connecting the self and wider groups to the nation as an 'imagined community' and this is something that is linked, on the one hand, to common

historical experience and shared cultural repertoires within a population. On the other hand, national identity is also strongly influenced by the successful production and absorption of nationalist discourse. This brings us to nationalism, which can be understood as a bridge that links national identity to politics by seeking to reduce the gap between the imagined, ideal of the nation and the actual reality (Smith 2007:18).

### *Nationalism*

Nationalism is often defined as a political ideology that prioritises the nation over other collective identities and whose principle aim is to seek political power in the name of the nation (Spencer, Wollman 2002: 2). In the view of Yitzak Brudny (1998: 5), nationalism as a political ideology aims to define three things: (i) who belongs to the nation (ii) the territorial boundaries of the nation and its relations with the outside world (iii) what social, cultural, economic set-up is best for the nation. Nationalism resembles an ideology in as far as it provides a rudimentary map that ‘provides people with the means to identify their own position in the world’ (Breuilly 1982: 365). On the other hand, nationalism is more than a search for political power; it also contains a quasi-religious element in appealing to the hearts of men. What differentiates nationalism from ideology is its flexible and fluid nature: it is able to morph and tap into existing identities, using modern mass communication to condense complex and diverse national identity into a simplified discourse of texts, myths, symbols and ceremonies, all of which appeal to the idea of ‘nation’ or ‘who we are as a people’.

In other words, what explains the power and diverse appeal of nationalism is its ability to mutate according to the apparent ‘needs’ of the national community and, thus, speak the ‘language of the masses’. This brings us to a key point: it is very difficult to offer a universal theory of nationalism, instead ‘grasping nationalism in its multiplicity of forms requires multiple theories’ (Calhoun 1997: 8). The diverse forms of nationalism have led researchers to offer a dazzling array of typologies and theories to describe certain kinds of nationalism. It is worth considering two areas that are particularly relevant for

the Russian case: the relationship between nation and empire and the question of ethnic and civil nationalism.

*Disputing the division of national and imperial, ethnic and civil*

A central challenge in nationalism studies is the diverse range of movements that can be called 'nationalist'. As Anderson pointed out, nationalism is 'Janus-headed'; alongside 'national liberators' such as San Martín and Garibaldi seeking liberation from foreign imperial or monarchical rule, we must also include imperial statesmen such as Sergei Uvarov and Thomas Babington Macaulay, both of whom promoted an 'official nationalism' (Anderson 1991:159). Historically speaking, one essential distinction can be made between nationalism aiming at 'liberation from hegemonic rule' (Condee 2012: 37) and the 'official nationalism' of a large state that is a 'conscious, self-protecting *policy*, intimately tied to the preservation of imperial-dynastic interests' and 'serving the interests of the state first and foremost.' (Anderson 1991: 159). Another way to put this division is that of 'Empire-preserving nationalism', which seeks to retain the unity of the existing state while often pursuing imperial or great power objectives abroad, and 'Empire-dismantling nationalism', which seeks to liberate a putative 'nation' from imperial or foreign domination (Condee 2012: 40).

The use of the word 'empire' to describe any form of nationalism may puzzle those who understand 'empire' and 'nation-states' as fundamentally different. Empire is often portrayed as hierarchical and part of the old world, while the nation is modern, egalitarian and 'conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship' across one national group (Anderson 1991: 7). In her two-volume study of the origins of totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt concluded that imperialism was used to direct nationalism away from internal social and political reform and outwards to the colonial realm (Arendt 1951). This 'imperial' or 'official' nationalism was supported by the upper classes and the establishment in reaction to the threat of 'popular vernacular nationalism' (Anderson 1991: 150). The important point to make here is that some of the most 'successful' nation-states were also empires at the same time and, as Krishan Kumar (2010) has noted, there is a post-imperial dynamic that should be taken into account in

those nations today. Countries like Spain, France and England have an ‘inescapably imperial dimension’ to their nation-building that was ‘the result of more or less forcible integration of neighbouring lands’ with often differing institutions and cultures (Kumar 2010: 128). Alexei Milller (2015: 309) has termed these states, including Tsarist Russia, ‘nationalising empires’, which combined imperial and national forms into one body. Despite shedding their ‘outer’ empires in the twentieth century, these states still face the challenge of preserving nation-states with constituent ‘national units’, be they Scottish, Catalan or Corsican (Smith 2007: 26).

Russia stands out in two important ways from the ‘post-imperial’ states of Europe. Firstly, the USSR cannot be straightforwardly labelled as an ‘empire’. Frederick Cooper (2005: 27) defines empire as ‘a political unit’ that ‘reproduces differentiation and inequality among people it incorporates’ (Cooper 2005: 27). Yet, the Soviet political centre was not driven by capitalist profit motives and, rather than suck resources and capital from periphery to metropole, more often redistributed these resources to spread the results of Soviet modernisation as evenly as possible across the whole union (Chari Vederly 2009: 15). On the other hand, the Soviet state was ‘imperialist’ in the sense that it imposed repressive systems upon ‘subject’ nations such as forced industrialisation, collectivization, as well as carrying out mass purges and arrests across the population.

The second point to consider is Russia’s semi-peripheral position on the edge of what post-Colonial and Critical theorists term the ‘global hegemonic core’ of Western nations. As J. Buckler (2009: 254) noted, Russia stands out as perhaps ‘the only non-western power to defend itself against Western imperialism for centuries, a powerful state that represented the only non-western path to modern society’. These two elements make Russia’s ‘post-imperial’ condition distinctive. While the Tsarist and Soviet ‘empires’ may have gone, the after-life of ‘imperial’ ways persists. While a large body of post-colonial research has explored how former colonial countries adapt to their new status ‘after empire’, less work has been done on how the former imperial metropole evolves *post-imperium*. Imperial legacies and themes can help determine what forms of nationalism are acceptable to the population.



Emil Pain (2009, 2016) argues that an ‘imperial nationalism’ dominates Russia today, important components of which include the desire to curb separatism and hold the ‘imperial body’ together, efforts to integrate citizens into the common ‘imperial’ culture and follow a civilizational purpose in global terms. Thus, instead of expecting nationalism to be incompatible with imperial longings, we should be ready for nationalist discourses that are infused with imperial and civilizational themes.

### *Civic and ethnic nationalism: A false dichotomy?*

Apart from ‘empire-nation’, another problematic dichotomy in nationalism studies is the ideal types of civic and ethnic nation-states. Hans Kohn (1994) viewed the Western ‘civic’ model as a positive product of ‘civic culture’: democratic participation, rule of law, free elections, universal suffrage and the right to run for office. Meanwhile, ethnic nationalism was presented as xenophobic, pregnant with potential violence and likely to lead to the exclusion and disenfranchisement of national minorities. As Brubaker (2004: 134) noted, this dichotomy is one that runs deep in everyday thinking; some nationalist movements are labelled ‘bad’ (xenophobic and dangerous), others ‘good’ (tolerant, progressive and inclusive). The constant reproduction of this type of thinking can tempt those studying nationalism to frame questions in terms of ‘transition’: is their case study heading more towards a ‘desirable’ civic or an ‘ugly’ ethnic nation-state type? Yet, the key problem with this is that the word ‘civic’ is as ambiguous as the word ‘ethnic’; in both cases it can be used to legitimize or stigmatize nation-building policies or nationalist movements. While Kazakhstan’s leaders attempt to legitimize their post-Soviet state as civic and multi-ethnic, Russia can stigmatize the Baltic States by attacking the ‘ethnic’ basis of their states. In the international arena we should expect most states to pay lip service to civic inclusiveness and tolerance, rather than emphasise the dominance of a single ethno-cultural group (ibid: 134).

Taras Kuzio (2002) argued the ethnic and civic typologies were useful mainly in Weberian terms as ‘ideal types’. In the real world all states contain ethnic and civic aspects as ‘*all* civic states (...) are based on ethno-cultural core(s)’ (Kuzio 2002: 20). Kuzio observed it was only in the 1960s that Western states

moved to more clearly civic all-inclusive nations and ended policies of ethnic discrimination to protect, for example, the WASP ethno-cultural core of the American nation (ibid: 27). Furthermore, the Western states have not succeeded in creating 'ideal' or 'pure' civic states today; ethnic identities persist and play a role in anti-migrant sentiment. In addition, civic-nation language can be employed in populist 'put our people first' stances that excludes certain groups from membership of the nation. It is important to avoid the myth of the absence of ethnic feeling or conflict in the West. Consider Catalan and Basque nationalism, which is based on 'ethnicity' in as far as it proposes that "we"—the Basques, Catalans, Scots, Croats, or Georgians are a different people from the Spaniards, the English, the Serbs, or the Russians' (Hobsbawm 1996: 256). Every nation-state, historically and today, is 'composed of both civic and ethno-cultural criteria'; what changes is the proportions of the mix (Kuzio 2002: 29).

Thus, 'racist views can sometimes go together with strong support for democracy, an inclusive state and respect for fundamental civic and social rights and freedoms' (ibid). In other words, 'if one combines a broad understanding of civic and a broad understanding of ethnic nationalism, one confronts a large middle ground that could be classified either way, and one can no longer think of the civic-ethnic distinction as *mutually exclusive*' (Brubaker 2004: 139). Thus, it is unreasonable to expect imperial, nationalist, ethnic, and civil to operate as distinct categories, undiluted by cross contamination. In the minds of ordinary people, it is entirely possible that imperial longings, ethnic feelings and a commitment to the civic nation can all coexist. This is possible because nationalism is essentially a project that attempts to process elements of national identity into a simplified and clear set of discourses that all co-nationals can absorb. This process of simplification and combination can easily lead to contradictory positions being submerged into one nationalist discourse.

Ultimately, nationalism is best understood in Craig Calhoun's terms, emerging from 'discursive formation', 'a way of speaking that shapes our consciousness' (1997: 3). This is a discourse made up of more than words and ideas; it is also one of institutions, practices, rituals and social relationships. In Foucauldian

terms, this discourse shapes how people perceive of objects and events. This ‘discursive formation’ imposes constraints on action and establishes the boundaries of what we can and cannot see. This ‘way of speaking’ produces debate and discussion that helps form a nationalist self-understanding. It is clear that a large part of this ‘way of speaking’ is about claims. As Mark Beissinger (1995: 156) noted, ‘a nation refers to a community of people deserving their own state. It is a claim, not a condition’. While Calhoun (1997: 4-5) prefers to group ‘nationalist rhetoric’ into ten discrete categories, this thesis follows the three main areas of nationalist claim-making proposed by Umut Özkirimli (2017: 220-21).

Özkirimli’s first category is ‘temporal claims’ that peer back and forward in time across the ‘linear time of nation’ (ibid: 220). Here certain elements of the national past are ‘remembered’ and ‘forgotten’ to fit a nationalist agenda in the present. Secondly, we have ‘identity claims’: nationalist discourse that divides social world into ‘us’ and ‘them’ where the ‘nation’ is juxtaposed with the ‘other(s)’. Thus, devotion to ‘we the nation’ attempts to override all other loyalties. Thirdly, we have spatial claims: the heavy focus on territory, land and soil, the homeland that is reconstructed through imagining her relationship with the wider world. These claim categories provide the materials that eventually come together to form a hegemonic nationalist discourse that presents certain courses for the ‘nation’ as ‘natural’ ‘normal’ and ‘better’, effectively side-lining alternative visions (ibid: 222). As the concept of ‘nationalist claims’ is central to the structure of this thesis, I will now turn to the content of these claim categories in more detail.

### *Temporal claims*

Temporal claims are essentially about the ‘idea of a nation extending from the past to the future’ (Calhoun 1997: 4). This imagines the nation as on a journey through the past to the current day. In order for this story to be transmittable certain myths and symbols about the past must be internalized and reproduced by large numbers. Anthony Smith (1991) referred to the ‘myth-symbol complex’ of nation that outlines the common origins and trajectory of the nation encouraging various social groups and classes to feel commonality.

Central to this is the creation of a ‘national story’ or ‘useable past’ that incorporates myths of the nation’s linear and continued progression through the ages. Examples can be found in England’s myths of Anglo-Saxon liberty, the heroes of Dunkirk or the British boast of having the ‘Mother of Parliaments’ or being exponents of ‘fair play’ (Smith 2007: 22). This ‘national past’ demonstrates a common fate, a common way of life and a sense of the nation as a family of shared kinship. For Billig (1995: 38), this involves a ‘double neglect’; ‘collective amnesia’ must prevail with regards to inconvenient aspects of the national past, while at the same time, certain consensual positions on more ‘positive’ aspects of the national past may emerge. The role of the state in ‘forgetting’ and ‘remembering’ is important, as well as certain actors in society able to influence social memory (Rothstein 2000: 497).

### *Identity claims*

At the heart of identity claims are discussions about ‘direct membership’ of nation, ‘where an individual is a part of the nation and categorically equivalent to other members’ (Calhoun 1997: 4-5). The key claim here is that all members of a national community belong together. The drive to encourage a feeling of oneness between members of the nation is often taken up by the state, which is central to the creation and dissemination of a ‘public culture’, through education, institutions and public rituals (Smith 2007: 19). This often involves attempting to win the allegiance of diverse ethnic groups to the wider national community. If this is not achieved then ‘the imagined community will not include large numbers of people who do not belong to the ethnic core’ (Kuzio 2002: 31). At the heart of this challenge is the debate on what it means to be a national citizen, and what policies on citizenship and immigration are needed. In attempting to steer their course through these difficult waters, states are faced with deviant everyday practices from the population as a whole that complicates efforts to create a more ‘unified’ national identity (Smith 2007: 21).

This brings us to the second part of identity claims, those made in relation to the legitimacy of the state and the political leadership in leading the nation. This involves a discourse that claims the current leadership is successfully

managing the nation, often in terms of achieving the kind of political and economic configuration desired by the 'nation'. A large part of this revolves around trust and legitimacy, the feeling that the policies of the political leadership are congruent with national aspirations. Thus, the identity link between people and state is based on an 'ascending notion of legitimacy, or the idea that government is just only when supported by popular will' (Calhoun 1997: 4-5). Even in an authoritarian context, governments, parties and leaders strive to avoid alienating citizens, and, in acting in the 'name of the nation', seek to close down the ever-present (and at times widening) gulf between 'the nation' (or the 'people') and 'the state' (Smith 2007: 25).

### *Spatial claims*

The final set of claims relates to how the nation is imagined as a territorial entity. This includes attachment to the historic homeland and certain landscapes, something that can be termed 'territorialisation' (Smith 2007: 19). In some cases territory can be central to nationalist claims; consider the Nagorno-Karabakh question for Azerbaijan or Alsace Lorraine for France (1870-1914). Spatial claims also involve relations with forces beyond the nation's borders, whether they are understood to be 'globalist' interest groups (bankers, international organisations), other nation-states, regional alliance blocs, or even civilizational entities. What is of interest here is how images of the 'imagined nation' in foreign affairs can be used to shore up national identity, filling ideational voids and, at times, mobilizing the population behind the flag. Events can be of real importance in consolidating people behind the nation, such as exploiting the theme of foreign 'Other' to demand patriotism on certain post-imperial sentiments and great power longings to produce powerful visions of the nation seeking to regain or secure a place in the world order.

Thus, the three claim categories above involve an impressive and rich range of nationalist discourse that can both reinforce and contradict one another. Examinations of nationalist discourse from above and below can reveal what is the 'the dominant nationalist project' in any national context and expose how it '*consolidates its hegemony by reproducing and naturalizing itself*' (Özkirimli 2017: 222 italics original author). In this sense, nationalism is a discourse tied

up with power and hegemony, transmitted across population until it becomes hegemonic common sense in Gramscian terms (Gramsci 1971). As Calhoun (1997: 5) noted, 'nations are constituted largely by the claims themselves, by the way of talking and thinking and acting that relies on these sorts of claims to produce collective identity, to mobilize people for collective projects, and to evaluate peoples and practices'. This thesis looks to identify the key components of hegemonic nationalist discourse in Russia today. In the next part of this chapter I will offer a discussion of how this discourse is absorbed, internalised and reproduced 'from below'.

## **Part Two: Studying the nation 'from below': emotions, myths, normality and generations**

*A natural order is a stable order. There is no chance that gravity will cease to function tomorrow, even if people stop believing in it. In contrast, an imagined order is always in danger of collapse, because it depends upon myths, and myths vanish once people stop believing in them. In order to safeguard an imagined order, continuous and strenuous efforts are imperative.*

Yuval Harari (2014: 259)

Studies of national identity and nationalism often focus on the activities of high-level actors in constructing the nation 'from above'. Yet, as Heinrich Best (2011:996) noted, we cannot put elites 'in the position of a sorcerer's apprentice' or 'assume they can manipulate populations at will'. Nation-building 'from above' is 'constrained and directed by specific historical givens and experiences shaping the collective memories and living conditions of the general population' (ibid). The aspiration is to bring the macro- and micro-level of analysis of nationalism together, one that includes the 'masses' or 'ordinary people' as well as the activities of 'elites', 'intellectuals' and the 'state'. Thus, I do not treat nationalism as a system of ideas akin to Marxism or neo-liberalism; its appeal is heavily tied up with emotions and the making of 'us' and 'them'. This brings us to the field of social psychology, which explores how emotions can be jointly felt across a group. The merging of individual and group emotions with the perceived feelings of the 'imagined'

nation is a powerful dynamic, one that allows nationalist discourse to appeal to diverse segments of a population.

### *The collective self? Group identity, commonality and othering*

Examining nationalism ‘from below’ brings us into direct contact with the discursive practice of ‘group-making’, which is largely achieved through the creation and maintenance of boundaries of group inclusion and exclusion (Wimmer 2013). Ordinary people do not passively accept the boundaries laid down by the state or media; feelings of belonging and alienation are at least partly driven by everyday experience of the social environment, which Lawrence Hirschfeld (1996) termed ‘folk sociologies’ or ‘commonsense ways of carving up the social world’ (Cited in Brubaker 2004: 9). In thinking of how they ‘belong’ within a group, a certain ‘categorical commonality’ is imagined (Brubaker 2004: 47) that allows diverse people to feel part of a collective nation. On the other hand, the language of exclusion is also important; this expresses hostility to an out-group and underlines their incompatibility with the nation. Research from social psychology suggests languages of commonality and exclusion exist side by side in stable group identities (Taifel 1982: 15). In this sense, it is hard to argue that people adopt or reject certain identities by matter of pure rational and logical reasoning; as Brubaker (2004: 45) pointed out, ‘Self-understanding is never purely cognitive; it is always affectively tinged or charged’.

Thus, the way people understand themselves in the social world is both cognitive and emotional. One way people share ‘common sense knowledge’ is through commonly expressed collective emotions. A number of authors have highlighted the need to trace longer-term emotional language in national identity (Clunan 2009, Malinova 2014a, Tsygankov 2014), suggesting national communities can share certain emotional states, be it optimism, frustration, dissatisfaction or fear. Liah Greenfeld (1992) offered a historical portrait of how Russia perceived the West from 1700 to 1850, highlighting the salience of a psychological state called *ressentiment*. Olga Malinova (2014a) has built on this, defining *ressentiment* as a long-term and deeply-rooted form of resentment. In the case of Russia, Greenfeld and Malinova identify the West as

the object of malice and envy, although they argue the intensity of this state has waxed and waned across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to Malinova (2014a: 293), this *ressentiment* is driven by the failed aspiration to gain ‘equal status’, which ‘was perceived as a matter of security and honour’.

It is important to note that emotions surrounding the nation are far from always negative. Antipathy and hostility to the Other, even racism and imperialism, are only part of the story. As Anderson (1991: 141) noted, we must remember that ‘nations also inspire love (...) the cultural products of nationalism – poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts – show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles. On the other hand, how truly rare is it to find *analogous* nationalist product expressing fear and loathing.’ Anderson views nationalism as a form of ‘political love’ expressed in the ‘vocabulary of kinship’. Thus, if national identity contains powerful positive and negative emotions, the question is how these feelings are transmitted across a population? In this research the two most important vehicles of transmission to emerge came in the form of story-telling about the nation (myths) and normative claims about what the nation should be (normality).

### *Narrative and Myth in the nation*

Mythical narratives about the nation use emotion and simplification to package the nation in such a way as to deepen its appeal to citizens of various ages and backgrounds. The prolific theorist of nationalism, A. D. Smith, placed special emphasis on the role of myths, memories, values, traditions and symbols as powerful differentiators and reminders of the unique culture and fate of the national community (Smith 1998: 191). Narratives on the ‘golden age’ of the nation can result in a dominant nationalist discourse on how to achieve the ‘restoration of the community to its former high estate and true mission’ (Smith 1997: 48–51). Here we need not linger too long on the point that many of these narratives involve distortion of historical fact or outright falsehood; applying standards of scientific scrutiny to myths is ‘a modernist conceit’ that fails to understand the ‘narrative dimensions of the human experience’ and the role myths play in supporting ‘a given collective identity’ and ‘legitimizing a set of sociopolitical relations’ (Abizadeh 2004: 293). In other words: ‘National



myths are not lies and fabrications; they are inspiring narratives, stemming from human *imagination*, in which we tell ourselves who we are or want to be' (ibid).

Jordan Peterson (2002: 25) has done much to demonstrate how myths operate as 'Narratives of the known' that, with the assistance of 'patriotic rituals, stories of ancestral heroes, myths and symbols of cultural or racial identity', help 'describe established territory'. Peterson offered four classes of myth that help answer three fundamental questions of human life: 'what is the nature (meaning, the significance) of current being?, to what (desirable) end should that state be moving? and, finally, what are the processes by which the present state might be transformed into that which is desired?' (ibid: 26). These four classes of myth revolve around the themes of stability, change, collapse and regeneration. Thus, narratives about the nation often mediate between cognitive-based rational positions and emotion. Peterson also argues that narratives about normality are of central importance as they 'tell us where we are, where we are going, and how we are going to get there' (ibid: 30). 'Revolutionary' narratives, on the other hand, 'describe the process by which "normal" narratives are transformed, when that becomes necessary.' We will now turn to a sociological treatment of the role normality narratives play in everyday conceptions of the nation.

### *Visions of the 'normal' nation*

Building on Erving Goffman's work on normality and abnormality as a means of reinforcing social order, Barbara Misztal (2001, 2015) highlighted the close relationship of normality and trust, which both act 'as a protective mechanism that prevents chaos and disorder by providing us with feelings of safety, certainty, and familiarity' (Misztal 2001: 312). Thus it is 'the feeling that order is "normal" or "natural" that allows us to trust others around us', a dynamic that is important in reducing the 'deficit of trust' between rulers and ruled (ibid: 322). Normality is vital to the existence of a 'feeling of continuity and a sense of prospects for the future.' In other words normality offers us a set of rules for playing the game that make our social world more 'predictable, reliable and legible' (ibid: 313). Accessing the 'normal' means unpacking

‘taken-for-granted values in normal life’ (ibid); it is clear that normality is something people aspire/refer to in order to make sense of everyday life, the feeling of being on the road to ‘normalisation’ is something that makes life more liveable and tolerable. At the same time we must acknowledge the powerful ‘stigma’ of abnormality – ‘deviant acts’ that ‘are improper because they undermine the intelligibility of everything else’ (ibid: 316).

The question of normality recurs repeatedly in questions of nationhood. In the Russian case it is sufficient to think of discussions of her ‘normal’ past before the October 1917, visions of the ‘normal’ interethnic relations of the USSR, the ‘abnormal’ political behaviour in the Bolotnaya protests, or the country’s quest to be a ‘normal’ great power. In all these questions we must understand normality as something that is contested; it is a ‘struggle (...) to determine what the basic units are which compose a given society’ and ‘shore up a specific vision of the social world’ (Croce, Salvatore 2017: 227). In the ‘everyday routine’ of a national or political community, ‘specific instances of reproducing normality (...) help buttress a political order’ (ibid 283). It is important to note that differing versions of normality exist in any population; generational, social and cultural differences between certain groups in society make it likely they will have differing ideas about what is ‘normal’ and ‘natural’. In order to make ‘normality’ an understandable and ‘legible’ thing to follow, Goffman discussed the importance of ‘frames’, which make ‘what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful’ (Goffman 1974: 21 cited Misztal 2001: 320). Normality is made up of a series of frames ‘through which people see and interpret their particular historical circumstance’ (Misztal 2015: 1). Frames are made up of various things people can use to interpret social reality, such as symbols, rhetoric and claims. In this thesis one of the key divisions in frames of normality is between Soviet and non-Soviet frames in determining what is ‘normal’ in a variety of questions. One likely factor in determining splits in normative standards is the question of differing age groups within a society and the question of inter-generational change.

## *Generations*

In terms of sociologists, Karl Mannheim was one of the first to ask if we can understand changing patterns of social and intellectual progress 'based on the biological law of the limited life-span of man and the overlap of old and new generation' (Mannheim 1952: 353). He did not view generations as neat, biological units but messy and fragmented: Mannheim saw the biological cycle of birth and renewal occurring alongside the transmission of social constructs across generations. In searching for the socio-historical structure of generation alongside biological rhythms, Mannheim argued that 'not every generation will develop a distinctive consciousness,' the tempo of social change in a given era will be an important determining factor (Pilcher 1994: 491).

Central to whether a distinct generational consciousness will emerge is whether certain memories of the generation are installed in youthful years. This could include watershed events (Watergate), connections to 'privileged intervals' (such as the Great Depression), identification with 'political and cultural mentors' opposing the 'dominant culture' and connection to sacred spaces (such as Greenwich Village or Woodstock), especially when all of the above are clearly fixed in one's formative adult years (18-30) (Eyerman, Turner 1998: 96). Schuman and Scott (1989: 360-361) found supporting evidence for the thesis that one's younger years determine a political worldview within a generation, with those events occurring after youth being assigned less relevance by respondents. While a large proportion of respondents choose events occurring in their early twenties as epoch-defining, the study also showed changing meaning for events; a far higher number of people from the 60's generation described World War II as a 'good war' than those who had actually lived through it (Schuman, Scott 1989: 378). Thus, it appears 'generational consciousness, when it is forged by a major traumatic event such as mass warfare, can overcome and transcend the barriers of social class to produce a powerful, solidaristic force in social relationships' (Eyerman, Turner 1998: 103).

For this study, the question of how myths and visions of normality are reproduced and transmitted between generations is of key interest. The 'nation'

as a discursive entity cannot expect to survive unless a set of ideas, values are passed on to younger generations. The emergence of a generation with a distinctive consciousness, or a 'political generation', may be significant in explaining national identity 'from below'.<sup>5</sup> In many ways a generation seeks to affirm oneself and find its own validity in a historical sense. Political generations are 'more or less consciously imagined social networks that reveal a great deal of information about the groups that describe themselves' (Kansteiner 2012: 112). The emergence of vigorous and distinct political generations is a recurring theme in recent Russian history; consider the role of the *shestdesyantiki* in driving the Khrushchev thaw or how the children of stagnation sailed the perestroika winds of change (Yurchak 2006: 31).<sup>6</sup> In this study, the tentative 'political generations' are the 'children of reform' (40-55) and the first post-Soviet youth generation (18-30). Both have rather different environments in their formative years (18-30). The first group came of age at the height of perestroika and witnessed the end of the USSR, experiencing the transition years as young adults. The second group came of age around the time Vladimir Putin came to power in an age of relative stabilization and are young adults at the time of the research.

Thus, the dynamics of generational transmission are of importance to how nationalist discourse is reproduced. Expanding on the ideas of Mannheim, DeMartini (1985) highlighted two vital components in intergenerational interaction. Firstly, we have transmission within a rough age cohort, between people of similar age. The second component is 'Lineage', which emphasises relations between generations, that parents and children can have a shared bond of consciousness, transmitting memories and values across the age groups. Thus, as Alexei Yurchak put it, 'generations are not natural, they are produced through common experience and through discourse about it.' (Yurchak 2006: 30). Thus, the challenge is to seek out evidence of nationalist discourse, in particular myths and versions of normality, that transcends certain generational pockets, and, thus, become more widely acceptable.

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<sup>5</sup> Kansteiner (2012: 11) saw a political generation as 'defined by how it differs from its predecessor, i.e. by its relational void.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Russia's political generations see Vladimir Pastukhov's article in *Novaya Gazeta* 'The Theory of Generations in Russia: From the *Frontivikov* to the Generation without a future. <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/07/18/64943-teoriya-o-pokoleniyah-rossii-ot-171-frontovikov-187-8212-k-171-pokoleniyu-bez-buduschego-187-i-dalshe>

## *Conclusion*

In summation, there are number of key points to consider for those attempting to explain the resilience of nations and nationalism in the contemporary world. Firstly, much of the theoretical work on the 'nation' has been part of an academic debate between perennialists or modernists that is not of central relevance for those attempting to study the nation today. For the purposes of this thesis, the nation is primarily a way of talking; it is 'imagined' by large groups of people through the conversations they have about 'who we are as a people'. It is a fluid entity that is contingent on changing discourse about the national community: 'nationalism'. Thus, nationalism can be thought of as the product of discursive formation. It is comprised of claims about the desired nature of the 'nation'. Some of these temporal, identity and spatial claims may converge into a dominant and hegemonic 'discourse of the nation'.

In order to achieve hegemony, the dominant nationalist discourse must be acceptably synchronised with 'national identity', which is essentially a diverse range of ways of conceptualising 'us' and 'them' with reference to 'our' shared traits and desires as opposed to the 'rest'. While, national identity is subject to multiple and competing forces from above and below, certain historical, social and cultural factors also shape it. The complex interplay between nation, nationalism and national identity ensures that nation-ness is adaptable to ever-changing conditions. Attempting a more detailed mapping of how these three elements interact is an important goal for future theoretical work.

Accepting the fluid and discursive nature of nationalism does have important implications for certain typologies commonly used both in academic work and everyday journalism. Nationalism cannot be divided into neat types; nationalist discourse can absorb imperial, ethnic and civic influences. The 'nation' has shown through the centuries its ability to coexist with imperialist claims to supremacy, liberal doctrines of civic rights and dreams of ethnic and cultural unification. As a result, we must avoid labels of 'good' and 'bad' nationalism and treat each case accepting no pure type can be found; all nationalisms are mongrels with varying proportions of civic, ethnic and imperial elements. The

task of the researcher is to trace and explain how and where this manifests itself, highlighting the diverse constituent parts of nation-feeling.

Above all, 'imagined' nations are in a constant battle to survive and reproduce. In examining nationalism 'from below' a central concern is how the nation is reproduced in the minds of people. One of the important ways this occurs is through simplification and condensation of certain themes and lessons into mythological form. These myths play into ways of thinking that differentiate between 'us' and 'them' in national terms. They also buttress a variety of normative standards for understanding 'life in our country' and 'what we are like as a people'. Nationalist myths, be they about historical golden ages, Soviet stability or Putin's performance as leader, all serve to help people locate themselves in a particular nation at a particular time.

Consistent references to what is 'normal' and 'natural' play a vital role in nationalist discourses. The challenge for the researcher is to trace points of consensus, and those areas where certain myths and conceptualisations of normality start to break down; it is at these fracture lines that the nation's condition as a discursive entity can be evaluated. Ultimately we can interpret the 'nation' as something that is constantly re-imagined in response to certain external pressures. This could be 'threats' such as immigration, austerity, security or the European Union. Yet, the 'nation' also has its internal dynamic of reproduction across generations and time; the events and cultural influences that define a particular generation may be sufficiently distinct to bring out serious changes in national identity and the particular, dominant form of nationalism in the country. Given the above conceptualisation of national identity and nationalism, I will now proceed to outline the methodological basis of this research, exploring how my approach is congruent with this theoretical discussion.

## Chapter Two: Methodology

### Introduction

This chapter reviews the methodological considerations of this research as it evolved through its various stages. The rationale behind selecting a qualitative and ethnographic approach for this research is outlined, as well as an examination of the fundamental theoretical positions underpinning this choice. I will then retrospectively reflect on how research questions were developed, through textual analysis and interaction with respondents, as well as how working in a second language affected fieldwork. Following this, I will examine how I conducted the research, including selection of data sites, recruitment of respondents, and the conducting of interviews. In addition I will consider how my own identity influenced my positionality in fieldwork. Finally, I will outline how data analysis and coding was conducted. In conclusion, I will analyse how far the chosen methodology permitted or restricted the exploration of modern Russian national identity.

It is worth underlining that this methodology chapter should not be taken as a superfluous departure from the main body of this thesis; on the contrary it is a central part of research, effectively revealing the limitations, preferences and drivers at the heart of this research project. This entails an acknowledgement of the humanity of the researcher, who cannot claim for anything approaching emotionless, mechanical objectivity (Seale 2004: 259). The main method for reducing the impact of this subjectivity is being reflexive on the role of the researcher and transparent and open about how this research was conducted. In agreement with other researchers, in order to avoid distancing myself from an interpretive process that was driven, in very fundamental ways, by my decisions and outlook, I have employed the first person to underline the challenges inherent to this research (Pilkington 1994; Kay 2011).

### *Research aims and approach*

*Research cannot provide the mirror reflection of social reality that positivists strive for, but it may provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and their social worlds*

The aim of this research is to examine aspects of modern Russian national identity and ‘everyday’ nationalism, demonstrating how this operates in different generational, social and regional groups. This entails accessing the collective imagining of the Russian nation and state, which is built, in part, through the discursive activities of the state, the media and the various actors who act as conduits of this imagined reality to the larger mass of people. This, however, is a two-way conduction process; forces ‘from below’ also constrain and limit projects driven ‘from above’. Rather than employing quantitative survey data that involves large numbers of respondents answering a set of pre-ordained questions, this research employed an inductive ‘grounded theory’ approach, using qualitative in-depth interviews and the ethnographic experience of a year in the field to examine the ideas, narratives and arguments active in modern Russian national identity. In doing this, I did not rigidly follow ‘an original hypothesis which had been generated by a reading process very distant from the social reality’ that I sought to examine (Pilkington: 202). While I started with research questions influenced by academic and other studies, I understood these as ‘*sensitising concepts*’ providing ‘questions to pursue, angles to follow, or avenues to go down, without restricting’ the researcher in an unreasonable manner (O’Reilly 2012: 32).

It was hoped that using open questions in a flexible interview format would let the respondents determine what is important to them, permitting ‘the interesting issues raised in conversation to be pursued and irrelevant questions to be dropped’ (Pilkington 1994: 203). This would remove a potential straightjacket on the data, giving respondents agency in building the narratives while demanding that the researcher remain flexible and open to what emerges and avoid reaching conclusions prematurely (Silverman 2004: 11). My ‘grounded theory’ approach meant empirical evidence was collected at different stages and, after periods of evaluation and stock-taking, data collection was resumed (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Flexibility in this matter allowed the interview questions to evolve in response to increased contact with the culture and society involved, leading to substantial revisions of my initial research questions.



## *Epistemology*

The essential epistemological position of this research is that the ‘positivism’ of the natural sciences is poorly suited to the study of identity formation and change. Identity and nationalism cannot be measured objectively like a quantity of water; they must be sought in the practices, lives and discourses of people. There are two pillars to this research’s epistemology (Bryman 2012: 27-37). The first is based on an anti-Positivist Interpretivism (also known as the *Verstehen* approach of Max Weber) that claims that to understand human behaviour you must understand the meaning of the action from the actor's point of view. The second pillar is Constructionism, the view that all social phenomena is in flux and that knowledge of it is subjective. The most sensible way to understand social groups and organisations is to study the various patterns of behaviour of the various actors within them, in an attempt to locate the constant negotiation between them and the processes that bring change. Thus, it is impossible to provide one single absolute account of social reality; we cannot treat a social scientist as a precise instrument capable of revealing *absolute* truths about the social world. In fact, there can be several very valid accounts of the social world that, taken together, enrich our knowledge and understanding. In taking this position, I do not wish to attach myself to an extreme post-modern position that *absolutely* rejects the possibility of *absolute* truth in social science and claims *everything* is a construction. Instead I advocate what Steinar Kvale (1995: 21) called a ‘moderate post-modernism’ that ‘accepts the possibility of specific local, personal, and community forms of truth, with a focus on daily life and local narrative’. Thus, the central claim to validity and truth in this research is that the data adequately and fairly corresponds with the discourse of a community, in this case the ‘national community’ of Russia.

## *Research design: Interviews and the ethnographic approach*

The main tool employed in this research was semi-structured interviews with individuals, either on a one-on-one basis or in groups of two or three. From the outset the focus was on the content, argumentation and language employed to

justify the positions and opinions behind identities related to being ‘Russian’ today. The two main advantages of interviews can be surmised as:

*(1) Face-to-face interaction is the fullest condition of participating in the mind of another human being*

*(2) You must participate in the mind of another human being to acquire social knowledge*

*(Lofland, Lofland 1995: 16)*

The ethnographic researcher tends to conduct all the interviews in their research. Thus, the data collected ends up being put through the very subjective and unique interpretive mill of each individual researcher. If this process is accounted for openly, then qualitative research can undoubtedly bring fresh insights and analysis to a subject. Thus, reflexivity in qualitative research is vital. This is, however, demanding; it entails constant revision of methods and self-scrutiny. As long as there is transparency in methods, qualitative research can disclose a far richer picture than a standard set of answers on a survey, the results are the product of a unique fusion between the given researcher and the particular set of respondents involved. It is this fusion that can help generate fresh empirical findings, while contributing to the common body of knowledge in a subject area.

### ***The ethnographic method***

*Instead of collecting ‘data’ about people, the ethnographer seeks to learn from people, to be taught by them.*

*(Spradley 1979: 4)*

After successfully obtaining additional funding to conduct fieldwork in Russia, I spent fifteen months collecting data. This extended stay made an ethnographic approach possible, which has the advantage of making the study ‘resolutely grounded in a specific context’ (Baszanger, Dodier 2004: 12). I collected extensive fieldwork notes across this period on two points. The first were my own tentative observations and conclusions as I progressed through

the year, usually in response to things I heard, read, saw personally and reactions or comments to the interviews I had conducted. The second aspect of field notes was to reflect on methodological matters; this included comments on how the interviews had gone, ideas for revising the questions, thoughts on my interview style and how to link parts of the interview together. These notes were instrumental in guiding the research process and led to significant changes in how interviews were conducted. This approach can be termed ‘iterative-inductive’, meaning that data analysis, collection and write-up occur together in an interlinked manner over a sustained period rather being carried out in discrete phases. This is best understood as ‘an ongoing simultaneous process of deduction and induction, of theory building, testing and rebuilding’ (Ezzy 2002: 10 cited in O’Reilly 2012: 30). Having outlined the methodological approach, I will now turn to the parameters I established for my data pool.

### *The pool of data*

Initially, in line with theories on nationalism, this research sought to collect data from two layers. The first layer is the ‘view from below’; my interviews (occasionally in a group) with ordinary Russians from different socio-economic groups and occupations in two age groups of European Russia (St. Petersburg and Nizhny Novgorod, including the surrounding regions of these cities). The second layer was the ‘view from above’; where I would interview Moscow-based ‘experts’ in the themes being studied, including journalists, writers, intellectuals, academics, politicians, those conceptualising or implementing state policy and those figures deemed to be influencing the discourses of the ‘Russian nation’. In some cases this would involve a direct interview, in others an analysis of the written and spoken output of the state, including state policy documents, presidential speeches and transcripts of state media content such as interviews, talk shows and radio programmes. Ultimately, it proved beyond the scope of this thesis to comprehensively analyse all three layers and systematically account for their interactions. Instead, a few months after returning from fieldwork, after consulting with my supervisors, I took the decision to focus more extensively on the picture ‘from below’. This was mainly due to the sheer amount of data that was created and

the serious time constraints involved in conducting coding and analysis of all three layers. Nonetheless, preparing and examining materials of the state and media, along with conducting elite interviews, undoubtedly improved my own understanding of the context within which the nation is lived ‘from below’ and, thus, helped improve the depth and quality of my analysis.

I divided respondents into two rough generational groups and looked for representative slices in terms of social groups. This generational approach was central to the uniqueness of the original research proposal and intended to offer a picture of generational change in two age cohorts. Research has indicated the foundations of one’s political preferences, social attitudes and views of history were largely fixed over the period 18-30 (Schuman and Scott 1989; Eyerman, Turner 1998). As a result, the two groups selected were those currently between 18 and 30 and those who were this age in 1991, the year of the Soviet Union’s dissolution. The first group have grown up and come of age in a post-Soviet Putin-era Russia, while the latter had their formative period in the late Soviet era, with at least part of their youth in the new Russian Federation. This approach hoped to shed light on the evolution of Russian identity from 1991 and shed light on how Soviet and post-Soviet life experience influence identity formation. Respondents in both groups covered a wide range of social groups and professions, and came from families with both urban and rural backgrounds. (See appendix 6).

In order to collect my data sample I employed three forms of purposive sampling. Firstly, I conducted theoretical sampling in the pilot project in Moscow (summer 2014). This involved doing one or two interviews, transcribing and coding, ‘taking stock’ and then moving to new interviews having made alterations to the interview approach. A similar process occurred in the transitions between fieldwork in Nizhny Novgorod, Moscow and St. Petersburg. Secondly, I carried out generic purposive sampling in groups selected in advance to ensure a fair balance of gender, age groups, occupation and social background. Finally, I employed snowball sampling to set up referral chains in harder to access groups (i.e. working class or state employed respondents or those affiliated to state youth organisations).

In terms of respondent recruitment, I was ready to interview any citizen of the Russian Federation regardless of ethnic background with two exceptions. Firstly, I excluded those who had migrated to Russia fairly recently and had not gone through the education system, been ‘normalised’ as Russian citizens or underwent the majority of their formative years outside of Russia proper. Secondly, I excluded Russian citizens with a strong non-Russian ethnic or local identity indigenous to the Russian Federation such as Tatars, Chechens and Bashkirs. The main reason for these exclusions is that both of these groups are very interesting and worthy of a separate study that could, for example, consider adaptation into the host society or how a non-Russian ethnic identity interacts with a Russian civic identity (*rossiyskii*).

Originally, I had intended to follow the framework of the Russian demographer Natalia Zubarevich - ‘the Four Russias’ – in selecting research sites.<sup>7</sup> This splits Russia into four zones: the Federal cities, regional capitals/smaller towns, the rural heartland (*glubinka*) and, finally, the underdeveloped periphery of the North Caucasus and South Siberia. Due to the limited resources of this research, I was unable to visit rural sites or those more industrial ‘Russia Two’ cities. While some of my respondents either grew up in ‘Russia Two’ or still kept connections there, the vast majority belong to ‘Russia One’.<sup>8</sup> Zubarevich describes Russia One as having a post-industrial infrastructure, high internet access and a large well educated and middle-class component (30-40%) (ibid). Thus, much of the data in this thesis relates to this part of Russian society, one that is the most prosperous, educated and, arguably, the most influential in terms of Russian national identity formation and evolution.

### *Preparing research questions prior to fieldwork – Literature review and textual analysis*

My research questions for the pilot project emerged from writing an extended literature review in the first year of the research, taking advantage of the excellent Soviet Studies collection at Glasgow University library. This led me

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/natalia-zubarevich/four-russias-new-political-reality>

<sup>8</sup> Some respondents came from Sarov, a small ‘closed’ military town and Dzershinsk, a town with extensive chemical industries, both in Nizhny Novgorod region. Both of these are good examples of ‘Russia Two’.

to view national identity as founded on key thematic areas where nationalist claims are made. I arranged the interview format to explore possible commonality in the following areas of claim making:

*Exploring the common historical memory of Russians: How do Russians view the last century of their history and what are the points of contention and consensus?*

*Common view of desired socio-economic and political order and the values behind this.*

*The common understanding of 'us' in Russia: Meanings behind ambiguous terms such as 'nationalist', and 'patriot', how to define being/not being Russian.*

*Common view of the territory making up Russia: Do the borders of the Russian Federation adequately reflect the true extent of 'Russia'?*

*Common view of role in world: How to understand Russia's relations with other powers and her sense of purpose or mission in a global sense*

After the pilot project I significantly revised these sections. Eventually four sections emerged in the interview guide. The first section sought out whether respondents could identify positive and negative phases of 'national' history. The second section evolved into an examination of civic and ethnic Russianness and the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion. The third came to explore the legitimacy of the current leadership and how this compared to politics under Gorbachev/Yeltsin. The final section shifted away from territory to explain the salience of 'geopolitical visions'. These 'evolutions' were driven by the way respondents reacted to pilot project questions and represent an attempt to get closer to the issues at the forefront of people's minds. I also operated under the assumption that different people would want to talk about different topics and, in the course of the interviews, enough material would emerge of interest in each thematic area that could, in turn, be contrasted and compared to discourses in media output and state proclamations. My interviews with ordinary respondents could show how certain discourses are reinforced, downplayed or distorted.

### *Identifying dominant discourses on the nation*

Over the course of the thesis (2013-2016), I sought to build a fuller picture of the kind of debates and discourses in existence on my topic. The process of tracing modern Russian national identity from 1917 to the current day entailed reading a large quantity of historical primary and secondary sources, journalistic material, academic articles and publications, state policy documents, memoirs or biographical material and a host of media output from the current period that includes interviews, talk shows, radio phone-in shows. These materials reveal discourses in Russian national identity debates that may or may not resonate with ordinary people. If nation-building is the ‘aspiration to justify and explain why the population of the state is a whole entity’ (Panov 2010: 87), then this is at least partially achieved through the discursive activities of the state, media, political actors. In modern sociology, discourse as a term owes much to the work of Michael Foucault, who claimed a dominant ‘hegemonic discourse’ helps ‘constitute the general conditions under which dominant members of society “know” their world’ (Cited in Berg 2009: 215). Discourse only exists within a given historical context, something that shapes our feelings or understanding and can be referred to ‘*episteme*’ or ‘*zeitgeist*’. Within this I sought to trace a dominant or hegemonic discourse on the nation, finding that social consciousness is strongly connected to an ‘us/them’, ‘normal/abnormal’ dualism on certain nodal points (Berg 2009: 217).

It is with this in mind that, throughout the first two years of the PhD, I built up a list of websites that regularly produce articles thematically linked to my four areas of nationalist claim-making. These were monitored using a RSS feed programme ‘NetNewsWire’, which allowed me to retain relevant material for later detailed analysis. Furthermore, I also ‘followed’ key figures on both their personal websites and in social networking sites ‘Facebook’ and ‘Vkontakte’, collecting their most pertinent posts for analysis. I identified them as ‘key’ based on their number of followers, the frequency with which they were mentioned by my respondents, other texts and from my own judgement of their profile while in the field. In Russia, it can be argued that the control of discourse is more obviously in the hands of a state ‘power vertical’, which allocates trust across the elite and ensures its message is sent to the public. By

mapping the activities of the state policy and responses to it, I was able to identify influential contributors to the building, reinforcing and contesting of these discourses. In doing all of the above, I worked on materials in Russian language. This brings us to an important question, how using a second language affects fieldwork and data analysis.

### *Doing research in a second language*

Prior to beginning my PhD research, I had lived and worked in Russia for four years, passing language proficiency examinations there and in the UK. I had also carried out a qualitative research project in Almaty, Kazakhstan, which gave me experience of conducting ethnographic fieldwork using Russian. While I felt ‘proficient’ in the use of Russian, doing fieldwork in a foreign language throws up serious challenges. Looking back on how I prepared myself for the field, it is clear that, even though I was technically ‘proficient’ in Russian, I was still very anxious about presenting myself as a ‘master’ of my subject, in order to instil a sense of confidence among respondents and experts alike. It may be that this pressure to ‘perform like’ and ‘pass for’ a ‘native’ emerged from my own language learning habits and urge to reach ‘native-level’ fluency. In the first year of the PhD this ‘striving for fluency’ returned, only now the focus was to demonstrate ‘proficiency’ when talking about history, sociology and politics in Russian, to ‘fluently’ communicate my research aims to a Russian audience.

It has only been through retrospective reflection that I have come to a new understanding of language learning and identity, and the role cultural learning plays. Fluency in a language is accompanied by increasing capacities in intercultural communication, as Roberts et al. (2001: 6) note, ‘Language-and-culture learning involves a repositioning of the self both intellectually and at the level of “felt reality”’. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in another language means being an effective ‘intercultural speaker’, ‘border crosser’ and ‘cultural mediator’ who is able to take ‘a critical perspective both on their own cultural practices and that of others’ (Roberts et al, 2001: 31). It is possible I spent too much energy on ‘passing for a native’. Consider the laborious work done on interview guides, prompts and supplementary materials written up in



advance and checked by other native speakers but often not used. Rather than improving the quality of the interactions in interviews or making me a better listener/interpreter, these may have been more about making me feel ‘authoritative’. I believe it is more helpful for the researcher to embrace the role of ‘intercultural speaker’, i.e. one faced with the on-going challenge of communicating between two cultural spaces. It is my experience that a heavy focus on demonstrating ‘proficiency’ and ‘mastery’ does not necessarily improve the quality of the data one collects.

Another vital part of the ‘intercultural speaker’ is being open about the challenges of translation. Before setting off to begin fieldwork, the decision was taken early on to avoid translation to English until very late stages of the write-up. This protected the analysis from potential errors in translation and allowed me to examine Russian national identity with the idioms, metaphors and connotations emerging from Russian language, rather than rendering this invisible by early translation (Temple, Young 2004: 174). This allowed me to retain the Russian terms while developing ideas, rather than employing English-language ‘equivalents’, which can sanitise or strip away layers of meaning and inferences that exist in the original Russian phrase (Muller 2007: 207). In the example given by Martin Muller (2007: 208): ‘uniform translations of *vlast*, *sila* and *derzhava* as “power” normalize and neutralize the historical, cultural and social connotations that resonate with each of these terms.’ In order to counteract the losses of meaning involved in translation I have, where relevant, introduced and employed terms in Russian, which is otherwise known as a Holus-bolus translation. In employing a critical approach to translation and being transparent about the difficulties while retaining certain terms in Russian language, ‘grey areas’ between Russian and English are highlighted rather than obliterated.

After the pilot project I became more fully aware of the constant challenge of acting as an intermediary between two cultural spaces. It became clear to me that a variety of ambiguous terminology was being used in interviews, both in my questions and respondents’ answers. This included words such as ‘*patriot*’, ‘nationalist’, ‘The West’, and even ‘Russian’ – which has two versions in the Russian language (*russkii* and *rossiyskii*). The differences between these terms

in English and Russian ran far deeper than I had expected; it was only being in a Russian-language environment that made me realize that the meanings behind them were worth exploring, echoing the points made by Muller (2007) on the difficulties and near impossibility of translating key terms. The complex and changing meanings of certain terms in Russian also left me with the sense they were untranslatable; in this sense they are ‘moving targets’ whose meaning differs across time and place. This is, in turn, an advantage of the rich ‘thick descriptions’ of my respondents: they offer space to understand these phrases and words in a genuine context. I took the approach of retaining certain key expressions in Russian when writing in English and presenting at conferences.

## **The Actual experience of conducting the research**

### *Selection of Data sites*

Data collection began with a pilot project in Moscow from May to August 2014. Moscow was chosen for practical reasons: I have personal professional contacts at the Higher School of Economics and had a close friend living there ready to share accommodation. It was also a convenient base to visit Nizhny Novgorod several times and make initial contacts with the Lobachevski University. These visits resulted in working out a plan of co-operation with the sociology department there. The aim of the pilot project was to collect elite interviews to discuss some of the thematic areas and carry out six interviews with ordinary respondents, three from each age cohort. After twelve interviews and the conclusion of the pilot project, I returned to Glasgow for one month to examine the data and consider how well the existing approach had worked. Elite interviews provided useful discussion on how to explore the thematic areas of the research and where to look in terms of other texts or authors.

At the end of September 2014 I travelled to Nizhny Novgorod, where, over a period of three months, the period of main data collection began, with eighteen interviews conducted with both age groups, giving a total of thirty-eight. A partner organisation, the Lobachevski University of Nizhny Novgorod, was on hand to provide informal assistance in finding respondents. Snowball sampling was used to gain access to respondents in Nizhny, with the aim being a

representative mix in terms of gender, occupation, education levels and birthplace. It was hoped that younger respondents would also assist with referrals to older candidates, thus bridging the age gap in the researcher's social network. For the second stage of main data collection, from January to April 2015, the researcher was based in Moscow. The aim of these interviews was to show explore how experts or specialists on the thematic areas of my interviews would approach some of these questions, potentially offering a contrasting picture to that of my 'ordinary' respondents. It also gave me a chance to expose some of my own early tentative conclusions on specific research questions (arising from fieldwork notes over the period in Nizhny Novgorod) to the scrutiny of my expert respondents, who could react or provide comments. From April to September 2015, the final stage of data collection, I was located in St. Petersburg, where I conducted thirty-three interviews. This city was selected primarily to provide a good comparison with respondents in Nizhny Novgorod. In addition, as I had lived there previously for four years, the process of recruitment and referrals would be easier. In total, this meant I interviewed ninety-nine people for this research.<sup>9</sup>

### *Recruiting respondents*

For the younger age cohort, the process of finding respondents was fairly straightforward. In the first site, contacts were made at the Lobachevsky University, at local groups such as 'Nizhny Novgorod English Club' and the 'Russian Folk Singing Association', which in turn led to referrals for respondents fitting my requirements. Other contacts were made during social activities in my time there. Within two months the target of fifteen interviews had been reached, with respondents from a wide range of professional and social groups. While the snowball method was rapidly successful in the younger age group, locating older respondents from the ages of 40 to 55 proved to be somewhat harder. I had hoped that younger respondents would be happy to connect me to older respondents, however, especially relatives. As it turned out, however, only two of those I interviewed in Nizhny were willing to put me in touch with their friends or family. With hindsight this is

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<sup>9</sup> This includes forty-three in Nizhny, thirty-four in SPB, thirteen elite interviews and nine 'ordinary' Moscow respondents (see appendix 5).

understandable: these people had, after all, selflessly given up their time for an interview for no obvious personal or professional benefit only to face, at the end of the process, a request to help the research even further by providing a referral. It also reflects a sensible desire (in a Russian context) not to expose your most intimate circle of family to a person who has perhaps not yet ‘earned’ this level of trust.

One way I was able to circumvent this issue was by preparing an introductory message in Russian describing my research that could be sent by my contacts to potential respondents through social networking websites *Vkontakte* and *Facebook* (see appendix 5). This message explained the point of the research succinctly and was sent through an existing friend that I had become acquainted with. This ‘softer’ approach to recruitment let respondents more leeway in responding and reduced the tendency of ‘pressure’ recruitment, where one of my contacts may ‘harry’ a friend into meeting me without being given any real indication of the nature or purpose of the research. This approach was successful with both age groups but particularly with older respondents who, busy with work and family, would need some kind of explanation as to why they should sacrifice their time.

My introductory message also made it clear the interviews would be anonymous. My primary ethical consideration was to safeguard the ‘rights, interests and sensibilities’ of my ordinary respondents (Spradley 1979: 35). This entailed ensuring their participation and views would remain confidential, as disclosure of ‘unacceptable’ or ‘unpatriotic’ views in today’s Russia can potentially have an unpleasant impact on professional and personal affairs. I explained how interviewees would appear as anonymous and they did not have to answer every question. Data was stored on password protected hard drives on both a laptop and an external hard drive and respondents were informed their participation would be anonymous. All respondents agreed to be recorded, in the cases when these files were sent for transcription, those doing the work were from a different town and had no way to identify the interviewee. The transcriber was also asked to delete the recordings after use.

Recruitment of respondents in Moscow and St. Petersburg operated slightly

differently. In Moscow, after drawing up a list of potential elite respondents in the preceding months in Nizhny Novgorod and sending emails out in January, I received responses from elite respondents in a staged manner, with interview appointments gradually being arranged over the three months. In order to arrange interviews, it was essential to customise emails to each respondent very carefully but also concisely, highlighting what you wanted to discuss and demonstrating knowledge of their activities. Most emails resulted in being given a telephone number to call and finalise the place and time of interview.<sup>10</sup> Fourteen elite interviews were conducted in this period of the research, all of which took place in public places or private offices.

Data collection in St. Petersburg was simplified by immediate use of the methods employed in Nizhny Novgorod and the additional benefit of my own rather extensive social network in the city. The latter part was involved reconnecting and ‘catching up’ with old acquaintances and friends to ask for help with interview referrals. Half of respondents (6-7) in each age group were from my social network, while the rest came from new people I met through my social life in St. Petersburg and my introductory message on social media. Four interviews actually involved people who knew me well from my time in the city and, reflecting on the quality of these interviews, this did not have any negative affect on the results.

To help make it clear to respondents that I was grateful for their participation I made it clear I was at their disposal in terms of when and where interviews took place. This followed the principle that ‘the interviewer is the “taker” and the participant is the “giver”’; hence the interviewer must be flexible and willing to adapt him or herself to the preferences of the participant’ (Herzog 2005: 27). Interviews took place in a variety of locations, from the office provided by Lobachevski University, to cafes and bars, the homes and the workplaces of respondents. In terms of safety, I only went to people’s homes when accompanied by someone I knew well and all interviews at workplaces were referrals from trusted contacts at the Lobachevski University. While this

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<sup>10</sup> Elite respondents were asked for permission to be recorded (one refused) and assured that, prior to using their quotes, the researcher would send a brief email to confirm. Given that almost all of the elite respondents have a public profile, these interviews were more like a professional interaction.

meant a good range of locations, there were different dynamics in each place. In public places I had to be aware of privacy, selecting a table that would not be too intrusive or be subject to loud noise. Overall, I did not find that the place the interview was conducted was central to building rapport in an interview; as will be discussed, this appeared to depend more on how respondents were prepared prior to interview.

### *The importance of gatekeepers and the ethics of access*

One part of the recruitment process deserving of more examination is the role of gatekeepers in securing access and opening the chain of referrals. Within the context of this research then, I defined a gatekeeper as a person who provided direct referrals leading to an exceptional number of interviews. Two of these gatekeepers worked in the Sociology and Politics departments of Lobachevski University respectively and provided help due to their own interest in the project and, as they mentioned, to support a ‘fellow researcher’. The other two main gatekeepers were a contrast in terms of their motivations; the first was a Russian-born researcher from Spain temporarily in Nizhny Novgorod with extensive contacts in the working-class district of Avtozavodsk. She was happy to assist a fellow PhD student and was vital in setting up the interviews with people from working class backgrounds of the older generation. As all of these interviews took place in the home of respondents, her presence in the interviews was the key to breaking the ice, gaining rapport and trust, resulting in rich and productive interviews. She was careful not to intervene in the course of the interviews and acted mainly to facilitate initial introductions.

The other key gatekeeper, Nadia, whom I met at the ‘English Club’, had previously studied in the UK and was very keen to help.<sup>11</sup> Her direct referrals led to five interviews and, direct referrals from these led to large number of interviews that would have been otherwise impossible. Her role did, however, highlight some of the issues of using gatekeepers and how I was perceived in Russia. In return for Nadia’s help, I assisted her with a job application, and helped her relatives with some tasks. In some ways this felt like a familiar ‘favour for a favour’ dynamic I was accustomed to in Russia, what I

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<sup>11</sup> Name changed

understood as a culturally accepted way of beginning friendships or relationships. In this situation I soon found myself under pressure not to disappoint Nadia but at the same time maintain an ethical and professional position. While this was at times challenging, I believe both parties were ultimately happy in this exchange of favours. However, as a relatively young, Western researcher arriving in a provincial Russian town, some respondents may have viewed me as carrying a certain amount of social opportunity and believed that, by providing help with the research, they would be able to build a friendship or relationship with a 'Westerner'. Thus, I soon was made aware of the need to manage expectations in a careful way to avoid disappointing or hurting those who generously provide researchers with assistance. One lesson from this is the need to encourage fair expectations and be careful about the amount of time we take from any single individual. I remain, however, indebted to Nadia and numerous other individuals who, asking very little in return, opened their social networks to me; without gatekeepers this research would not have been able to reach the people it did.

### *Conducting the interviews*

The dynamic between interviewer and interviewee, which plays out differently in each interview, is of key importance to data quality. Interviewees react to what they see; not only in terms of what they see in ethnicity or gender, but to the emotional performance of the interviewer and how they present themselves (Silverman 2004: 127). Central to a successful interview is engaging the interviewee, which entails creating the right atmosphere prior to interviews. Most of my respondents had never participated in an interview and often did not see why anyone would take their 'opinions' as 'data'. In other environments or cultures it could have been superfluous to launch into a preamble as to why their participation was needed in the research. I found that introductory remarks helped respondents feel more confident about the validity of their participation. This involved underlining that, in order to form a picture of Russian identity today, I wanted the subjective views and experience of different Russians of different age groups. I took care to always point out that not all questions may be relevant to them or their lives and would not be

problematic to skip any part. To reduce any feeling of discomfort, I indicated that they should feel free to take any breaks when needed.

It is worth noting my handling of the elite interviews was quite different. They involved more time-consuming preparation than interviewing ordinary respondents. The key difference was the pressure to appear well informed and deserving of the faith shown in you by 'experts' who give you their time. Failure to do so entails negative consequences not only for oneself but also for others who attempt to follow in your footsteps. In several cases I was interrogated as to my credentials just before the interview to ensure they were comfortable with me recording the interview. In another situation, I faced a very uncomfortable interview with an academic who was convinced my research approach and aims were incorrect and full of flaws. This, naturally, made it hard to focus on the questions and resist emotions that would make the interview hard to conduct. The point here is that elite interviews can be more demanding and stressful in different ways to the other 'ordinary' respondents but offer rewards in terms of data and contacts that compensate for this investment.

Elite interviews proceeded along two lines: Either they would take the standard interview of the ordinary respondent and give their own perspective on it from their own professional sphere in Moscow such as journalism, the media, political organisations or state bodies; or the interview would have specialised questions on the precise area they focus on, be it for example international relations, civic identity, historical memory or interethnic relations. For the former type of elite interviews, I prepared specific questions from my readings from each individual expert, in accordance with their status and their own output/work. For example, I questioned the historian Professor Alexei Miller on issues relating purely to historical memory and the history of Russian national identity formation. In the second type of elite interview, I interviewed someone with a 'special' background using more or less the same questions I put to my 'ordinary' respondents. This included the TV producer of the nostalgic cultural NTV programme '*Namedni*', A former leader of Kremlin youth organisation *nashi*, and journalists from *Kommersant* and *Open Democracy*. Elite interviews in Moscow also led to the researcher being



referred for an additional three elite interviews in St. Petersburg.

### *My role as researcher: the emergence of a field identity*

Given the centrality of identity to this thesis, I feel it would be amiss not to consider how fieldwork interplayed with my own sense of self. This was a dynamic that I came to understand more clearly after post-fieldwork reflections. Entering Russia just months after the annexation of Crimea (in March 2014), in an atmosphere of heightened national feeling, I was often asked by a wide range of people why I wanted to do this kind of research. My own field identity emerged as an answer to a rather simple question: ‘Why have you come to study us?’ Answers to this revolved around my connections to Russia: where I learned Russian, why I chose Russia and why I was pursuing this research, along with attempts to elicit my own personal view of the country and her current situation. In answering such questions I had to come to grips with my own identity and convincingly explain why I had chosen to take on such a project. There was a sense of role-reversal: instead of the curious ethnographic researcher exploring the ‘alien world’, I was the ‘intruder’ being submitted to interrogation. Given my own background living in Russia and connection to the country, this was about coming to terms with the ‘Scottish’ and ‘Russian’ parts of my identity. The conversations I had with Russians, which were and influenced by the events of the time and the trends of the larger media space, helped forge a field identity that combined Scottish and Russophile elements.

Presenting myself as ‘Scottish’ in the context of the then recent independence referendum brought curiosity to the fore and, given my own (moderate) pro-independence and anti-Westminster stance, could rather unexpectedly position me as being a ‘friendly’ European rather than part of the ‘anti-Russian’ American-British contingent. The ‘neutrality’ of this position, while challenging to maintain at certain moments, was something I took on as part of my responsibility as a professional researcher. The essence of this ‘neutrality’ was outlined to respondents who asked for my views in the following way: ‘I want to see things from your perspective. I am here to learn and provide a more authentic picture of Russia than is present in the current distorted media

representations both here and in the West. Russia is a country close to my heart and I want to learn more about it from Russians themselves'. This message, which is in line with my feelings on the matter, helped establish trust and credibility in a sensitive environment among people of a wide spectrum, from pro-Putin patriots and Slavophile Orthodox traditionalists, to anti-Kremlin nationalists, pro-Western liberals and Soviet nostalgists. Given my own background living in Russia, I would like to underline that the emotional part of this argument was by no means a fabrication: a key driver in doing this research was to improve understanding of the Russian perspective for a wider audience. I would argue the emergence of a field identity is a vital process in ethnographic research, both in making you appear as a credible researcher in the field and in sustaining energy and morale levels over extended periods 'in the field'. The final section of this chapter will turn to how I analysed the large amounts of data produced during fieldwork.

### *Data analysis*

Before data analysis could begin, a large volume of transcription had to be carried out. I personally carried out all the interviews and avoided the issue of 'third-hand data' where somebody else carries out the interviews, while another transcribes (Temple et al 2006). I was, however, forced due to time and workload considerations to 'outsource' around half of the transcriptions to native speakers of Russian. There are issues to be considered in this 'hiring out of the chore' (Tilley 2003: 769) of transcriptions and I looked to take precautions. In selecting transcribers I looked for two things; diligence to accuracy and remoteness from the social networks of the interviewees. To explain what was meant by 'accuracy,' I asked the transcribers to reproduce the intended feelings of the respondent with minimal editing of word choice. To ensure this accuracy I had two safeguards; firstly extensive checking of the first transcript to ensure quality before sending more interviews; secondly, correcting and looking over the transcripts with audio in background when doing the coding of the interviews in data analysis phase.

As mentioned above, this study looked to employ, as far as possible, an inductive approach to the data. This meant that analysis and data collection

occurred side by side. Nonetheless, I still faced the classic situation of returning from the field with a large amount of data and notes that needed ‘sorting, summarising, organising, translating’ in order to reach a ‘coherent argument’ (O’ Reilly 2012: 186). Data analysis began with a phase of ‘open-coding’, where data were re-examined and re-organised and deconstructed into discrete parts by manually searching through the textual material and coding all interesting areas of the data with as few preconceived ideas about what will emerge as possible (Welsh 2002). Coding followed a three-stage process involving: ‘(a) noticing relevant phenomena, (b) collecting examples of those phenomena, and (c) analysing those phenomena in order to find commonalities, differences, patterns, and structures’ (Coffey 1996: 28). After developing a large number of open codes, I carried out ‘focused coding’ that, as opposed to the deconstructive nature of open coding, is a more constructive process and is achieved by a great deal of analysis.

I employed Nvivo software to assist in this process, taking the approach of ‘learning by doing’ to become proficient in using the platform. It was hoped that it would compensate by saving time in organising and retrieving data and codes. Nvivo was used to divide up data into the questions I asked respondents, and then I manually coded and analysed these sections into smaller themes. I used Nvivo alongside manual coding, printing off NVivo ‘node coding’ reports, which collected all the text coded at one node in one document. These hard copies were then coded the ‘old-fashioned’ way with pens of different colour (Welsh 2002). I also made use of Nvivo’s memo function to track my own notes, thoughts and comments, which proved to be a useful tool in reflective thought and data analysis.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has examined the foundations of the original research design and revealed some of the practical constraints acting on data collection and analysis, as well as the personal challenges and ethical dilemmas involved. It is hoped that this transparent account on how this thesis evolved clarifies my own role and influence as researcher. The above methodological approach was aimed at revealing certain ‘truths’ at the everyday level, revealing the micro-

discourse of ‘lived reality’ that is often lacking from studies of Russian national identity. This micro-discourse complements and, at times, confronts the macro-discourse of quantitative surveys. In doing this, my own self-presentation as a researcher emerged as a response to encounters with Russians in a variety of settings, most of which were informal. The use of a ‘grounded theory’ approach allowed far more flexibility in the emergence of interview guides and made me respond to emerging themes in empirical data at an early stage, rather than me being tied to the mast of a rigid hypothesis. This, naturally, also made the process of data collection and analysis much longer and time-consuming, a point to be considered for those weighing up methodological approaches. However, the ethnographic approach can be fruitful in shedding light on national identity. Having an extended period to determine interview questions based on what people actually respond to and can talk about at length is important; far too many large scale surveys contain questions that people may, in reality, be unable to say more than a few words about. Before I present the empirical data that emerged from the above methodology, I will now return to the specific case of Tsarist and Soviet national identity formation and nationalism from 1900 to 1991. This is then followed by a more detailed review of nation-building in post-Soviet Russia (1991-2014).

## Chapter Three

### The Literature Review

#### Part one. Two empires, two collapses: 1900-1991

In the theoretical chapter of this thesis, national identity was defined as a fluid entity evolving and shifting across time. While this identity is not immutable, it is not a blank canvas. The national identity we study today is moulded and shaped by the historical, social and cultural conditions of previous generations. For nationalist entrepreneurs attempting to lead the imagined community, national identity is not mere silly putty that can be easily refashioned to suit the needs of elites. The purpose of this chapter is to outline some of the key historical factors that have shaped Russian national identity, which are important to the argumentation of this thesis. These can be divided into three areas: the pre-revolutionary or Romanov heritage, Soviet legacies and the lived experience of a tumultuous decade (1988-1998) that saw promises of a new age, state disintegration and socio-economic turmoil.

The first part of the chapter examines the last decades of Tsarist Russia, highlighting the salience of the imperial in the official nationalism of the time, the importance of the Slavophile-Westerniser debate and the unbridgeable gulfs between state and intellectuals, on the one hand, and the Russian masses and elites on the other. Secondly, I will examine the effects of the Soviet period on Russian national identity, highlighting the special features of Soviet nation-building and the emergence of a ‘Soviet person’ (*Homo Sovieticus*). This includes the promotion of a Russocentric version of the civic nation that outwardly rejected ethnicity but encouraged Russians to think of themselves as the ‘vanguard’ within the Soviet ‘Friendship of Peoples’. It also involved strong commitment to the ideas of a mighty state, one capable of both retaining superpower status in global terms and essentially running almost every aspect of economic, social and cultural life. Soviet citizens responded to this unique ‘statism’ of Soviet totalitarianism by withdrawing from any kind of activism not approved by the Party-State, adopting a paternalistic relationship with the all-powerful state while advocating a conservative and passive patriotism. The trends and tendencies described in this chapter re-emerge in the empirical

chapters of this thesis on today's Russia. Thus, the historical pre-conditions described in this chapter should be kept in mind when considering the current equilibrium in mainstream Russian national identity and nationalism.

### *Nation-building in the decades leading up to 1917*

Stretching from Poland in the West to Vladivostok in the East, the Romanov Empire was one of the world's largest empires. It appears intuitively unsurprising that Tsarist nation-building faced serious challenges, especially in comparison to Germany or Great Britain, with whom it failed to maintain pace in terms of economic, military and political development. In an age of rising nation states, the Russian empire has been accused of failing to bring about the 'transformation of subjects into citizens' (Beissinger 1995: 8). The challenges of achieving this in nineteenth century Russia still resonate in the present day. For one, the sheer size of the country made it far harder to achieve the kind of internal economic and regional integration seen in France or Germany in the same period (Suny 1997: 30-32). In other words 'the vastness of the empire's territory, the lack of (...) means of communication and transportation, the underdeveloped educational system and a low level of literacy' made nation-building harder (Suny 2102: 22). Secondly, Russia emerged as a great land empire that expanded well beyond its original ethno-cultural Russian (*russkii*) core.<sup>12</sup> As the Romanov dynasty progressed in its territorial expansion, imperial imperatives for stability included the extensive incorporation of non-Russian elites into imperial administrative structures. The Russian ethno-cultural core was not separated from its colonial conquests by water but sprawled across the Eurasian continent. The dividing lines between 'home nation' and 'imperial domains' were unclear and, furthermore, ethnic Russians made up less than half of the empire's population. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say 'Russia did not have an empire; it was an empire' (Sakwa 2008: 208). Integrating the majority of the population into a Russian nation (*russkaya natsiia*) was made more difficult due to the diversity of the empire. Thirdly, autocratic and aristocratic political structures, which successive emperors failed to reform, hampered the development of the horizontal ties that

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<sup>12</sup> This is reflected in the two historical names for Russia, *Rus'*, the original ethnic heartland, and *Rossiia*, which refers to the 'greater' or 'imperial' Russia from the late sixteenth century onwards (Wortman 2000: 7).

could link citizens and civil institutions. This resulted in great chasms between the illiterate, Russian peasant masses, the intelligentsia and the ruling elite (Hosking 1997: 478).

Nonetheless, by the last decades of the Romanov Empire, small spaces of civil society had emerged where public opinion could be contested and certain topics in national identity discussed. In these decades the main discursive division in Russian national identity was between Westernisers and Slavophiles. This split revolved around whether Russia was fundamentally 'European' and, thus, bound to follow the Western European development pathways or whether, in fact, she was civilizationally distinct and, thus, able to forge her own 'unique' path by embracing the traditions of the 'real Russia' found in the peasantry and Orthodoxy (Tolz 2001: 16). While Russia's leaders successively flirted with both of these camps, the last two Tsars adopted Slavophile positions (ibid: 100). Part of the reason for this was the tendency to view nationalism as a threat to the empire's stability by carrying the 'contagions' of democracy and liberalism into Russia. This was manifested in the Decembrist revolt (1825) and Polish November Uprising (1830-31), both of which demanded a new constitution that would make 'the People' the source of sovereignty, thus challenging the Tsar's authority and legitimacy (Pain 2016: 49).

Emil Pain (2016) has argued that the 'official nationalism' of the Minister of Education Sergei Uvarov (in office from 1833 to 1849) was designed to counter this challenge. The concept of 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality' acted as a direct counterpoint to 'liberty, fraternity and equality'. As a conservative ideology, Tsarist official and statist nationalism rejected the word 'nation' (*natsiia*) as foreign word, and replaced it with *narodnost'* (Pain 2016: 49). This conservatism was combined, however, with Russification policies, which Anderson has described as 'stretching the short, tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of empire' (Anderson 1991: 86). Russification, however, only enflamed anti-Russian sentiment in the non-Russian regions and, thus, threatened the integrity of the empire. Therefore, Russification was pursued inconsistently, abandoned in places where it endangered stability

(Finland and Poland) and pursued more fully where it was relatively successful (Ukraine and Belarus) (Tolz 2001: 174-77).

The historian Alexei Miller (2015: 309-368) has convincingly argued that, among Ukrainians, Belarusians and ethnic Russians at least, the authorities made impressive progress in building a ‘greater Russian nation’ (*bol’shaya russkaya natsiia*), encouraging many groups to identify as Russian (*russkii*). Miller characterised the Tsarist state as a ‘nationalising empire’ and argued it was only the outbreak of war that interrupted this promising attempt to bind empire together with a common sense of Russianness. While Miller argued increasing numbers of the empire’s commercial and intellectual elites were accepting this project, Vera Tolz (2001) underlined that Russian intellectuals were fatally divided over how to approach Tsarist official nationalism. Given the disproportionate number of Russian intellectuals that rejected collaboration and joined the political opposition, it appears Uvarov’s Slavophile-inspired ‘official nationalism’ lacked important appeal (Lieven 2000). This deprived ‘official statist nationalism’ of a genuine popular liberal and socialist component and suggests the limitations of managing nationalism ‘from above’.

The failure of the Tsarist authorities to allow a genuinely civic form of nationhood to emerge through civic institutions and participation that could integrate Russia’s intelligentsia was an important background factor in the eventual demise of the empire in 1917. While the co-opting of the intelligentsia was limited, the process of transforming the peasants into ‘Russians’ was still ‘barely underway in the Russian-speaking lands at the turn of the twentieth century’ (Brandenberger 2010: 724). If we take the modernist perspective of Gellner, Anderson and Hobsbawm, this failure can be attributed to the lack of mass literacy and urbanisation, a deficiency the Soviets would eventually remedy. Ultimately, the state-promoted, conservative and Slavophile version of Russian national identity had limited mobilising potential as a hegemonic nationalist discourse.



### *Soviet nation-building from the Revolution to Stalinism*

The October Revolution and Bolshevik victory in the Russian Civil War ushered in a seventy-four year phase during which the new Soviet state, which claimed to have started a new era in human history, attempted to transcend both nation and empire to create a new entity. Vehemently rejecting imperialism, Marxists held that nationalism and national consciousness was a mere transitional stage in a wider identity metamorphosis that would end with a socialist, internationalist ‘proletarian’ identity that did not depend on ethnicity or language. Soviet thinkers tended to see nationalism as a ‘pubertal disorder of the human race, a necessary phase, but something to be got through as swiftly as possible’ (Hosking 2006: 71).<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, in the first decade of Soviet power the new authorities were embattled and in search of allies; one group they attempted to win over were the ‘oppressed’ non-Russian national groups. Terry Martin (2001) famously characterised the USSR of the 1920’s as an ‘Affirmative Action Empire’. Martin argued Soviet Nationality Policy looked to disarm nationalism by giving certain aspects of nationhood to ‘small nations’. In the words of party theorist Nikolai Bukharin, the Bolsheviks sought ‘to purchase for themselves the genuine trust of the previously oppressed peoples’ (Hosking 2006: 72). Yet, in promoting *korenizatziya*, the Soviets unintentionally constructed and promoted national identity in the non-Russian republics, resulting in what Francine Hirsch called ‘an empire of nations’ (Hirsch 1997, 2000).

The other major pillar of Soviet Nationality policy was to root out ‘Great Russian Chauvinism’. As V. Vujacic (2009: 54) has noted; ‘whereas the oppressed nationalities could overcome their backwardness and become Soviet through the medium of their particular national cultures, the Russian peasant could not’; their transformation to socialist consciousness had to occur much faster. As a result, Russian national, cultural and social institutions were subjected to comprehensive assault: the Cossacks were the first national group to face repression and deportation, the Tsar and his family executed, the old

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<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that Leninist thought did innovate in terms of Marxist views of the nation; it renounced both the radical internationalism of Rosa Luxemburg and the Austro-Marxist position on non-territorial cultural autonomy promoted by Otto Bauer. Instead, Lenin distinguished between oppressor and oppressed nations, marking out those imperialist powers who ‘divide up the world for the purposes of plunder and the extortion of profits.’ (Lenin, V.I. (1970), *Imperialism – the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, cited in Spencer, Wollman 2002:14).

aristocracy liquidated, and the Orthodox Church devastated by the widespread arrests of priests and the closure of churches. In their treatment of Russian national symbols and institutions, the Bolsheviks were faithful to the battle cry of the *Internationale*: ‘We will destroy this world of violence, Down to the foundations, and then, We will build our new world’.

Thus, the Soviet project meant ‘the domestic, social and economic institutions of Russia were uprooted and replaced by a paternalist police state’ (Hosking 2006: 38). This was followed up by educational policies to encourage a socialist consciousness among citizens, which can be viewed as an attempt to impose a single dominant meta-narrative upon an entire population. This mission was led by M. N. Pokrovskii, deputy people’s commissar of education of the RSFSR, who devised a series of textbooks to teach the masses ‘historical materialism’: the historical journey of class struggle throughout the ages that ended with the birth of an international proletariat. According to this version, Russian Tsarist history was full of backwardness and oppression and ‘no positive value was attached to any ethnic group’s inclusion under Tsarist rule’ (Szporluk 1980: 43).

With the rise to power of Joseph Stalin at the end of the 1920’s, a new urgency and violence entered politics, resulting in the rejection of Pokrovskii’s historical materialism and a return to the Russocentric ‘nationalising empire’ traditions of the late Tsarist period. The Soviet state was to be mobilized to meet the demands of collectivization, rapid industrialisation and military redevelopment. With this came a distinct turn toward promoting conventional patriotism for the Soviet motherland. ‘Socialism in One Country’ required a new patriotic narrative to legitimise the massive sacrifices required and bring stability and cohesion to Soviet society. Some have argued that the Soviet leadership came to view the historical materialism of the ‘Pokrovskii School’ as ineffective in consolidating a common Soviet identity (Brandenberger 2002; Vujacic 2009).

Whatever the motivations, this 1930’s turn to patriotic language and a useable past was a crucial moment in the story of modern Russian national identity. With a newly literate population, united by new urbanization and modern

means of communication, a national discourse could be spread across a putative ‘imagined community’ with more rapidity and breadth than was possible under the Romanovs. Stalin’s jingoistic and nationalistic propaganda condemned Trotskyism and Menshevism for lacking faith in the USSR’s ability to build socialism by itself, condemning the country to the role of mere ‘appendage of the future revolution in the West’ (English 2000: 39). In 1931, Stalin underlined this in a speech to a major conference: ‘Now, since we have overthrown capitalism and power belongs to the working class, we have a fatherland and will defend its independence’ (Brandenberger 2002: 28).<sup>14</sup>

David Brandenberger argued that the USSR under Stalin shifted to a ‘Russocentric’ form of identity, pursuing this ‘form of *etatism* as the most effective way to promote state-building and popular loyalty to the regime’ (2002: 4). This approach was able to ‘foster a maximally accessible, populist sense of Soviet social identity’ (ibid: 9) that proved enduring beyond Stalin’s death. Brandenberger (ibid: 91) offers compelling material evidence for this: new state policies promoted a Sovietised-Russian identity through a sudden but selective embrace of Russian literature, including Pushkin, Turgenev, Nekrasov, Tolstoi and Chekov. In film, historical figures such as Peter the Great and Alexander Nevsky were lionized, providing the masses with examples of Russian heroism from the past. A new textbook, ‘A Short Course on the History of the USSR’ (1937), replaced the now discredited Pokrovskii curriculum, providing a simpler narrative history of the heroic figures and a far more positive treatment of Russia’s pre-1917 past.

It should be noted, however, that many Bolsheviks in Lenin’s time viewed the Russians as the ‘elder brother’: the most ‘advanced’ nation, the glue holding the USSR together, the vanguard leading the rest of the world into the ‘promised land’ of communism.<sup>15</sup> While he lauded elements of pre-Soviet Russian culture and statecraft, Stalin did not reverse the essentials of Lenin’s

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<sup>14</sup> In the same year in an address to industrial managers, Stalin made a speech rich with references to Russia’s state-building efforts: ‘She (Russia) was beaten by all - for her backwardness. For her military backwardness, for her cultural backwardness, for political backwardness, for industrial backwardness, for agricultural backwardness. She was beaten because to beat her was profitable and went unpunished. You remember the words of the pre-revolutionary poet: “Thou art poor and thou art plentiful, thou art mighty and thou art helpless, Mother Russia”’ (cited in O’Connor 2006: 36).

<sup>15</sup> Consider G. Zinoviev’s 1920 speech to the Petrograd Soviet: ‘We cannot do without the petroleum of Azerbaijan or the cotton of Turkestan. We take those products which are necessary for us not as former exploiters, but as elder brothers bearing the torch of civilization’ (Huttenbach 1990:70).

Nationality policy. A massive ‘Friendship of Nations’ propaganda campaign was launched across the country and was enshrined in the 1936 constitution’s commitment to multi-ethnic diversity. On the other hand, Stalin did violate some elements of Leninist nationalities policy. Commitment to *Korenizatzia* was diluted by ‘Russification’: a 1938 law made studying Russian language mandatory in schools, and millions of Russians were sent to the non-Russian periphery to take key jobs, with 1.7 million moving to Kazakhstan and Central Asia alone from 1926 to 1939 (O’Connor 2006: 37). This occurred alongside the mass arrest, execution or deportation of non-Russian intellectual and administrative elites in the Great Terror.

Yuri Slezkine (1994) employed the metaphor of the Soviet Union as a communal apartment to shed light on the way the hierarchies between national groups functioned in this period. While the bedrooms of this *kommunalka* were allocated to each of the non-Russian republics, who could decorate them with their own flags, languages, maps and heroic histories, the central, communal part of the flat was occupied by the Russians. This area was ‘unmarked by paraphernalia, unclaimed by its “own” nation and inhabited by a very large number of austere but increasingly sensitive proletarians’ (Slezkine 1994: 433). The increasing recognition of the Russians’ leading ‘elder brother’ role under Stalin, meant, in Slezkine’s view, the start of a new phase where ‘the Russians began to bully their neighbours and decorate their part of the communal apartment’ (ibid: 444).

The fact that this period involved a desperate and heroic struggle with fascist invaders made the process of consolidating the regime easier in some ways. Victory in the Second World War ‘solidified and sanctified the Soviet regime and Stalin’ (Suny 2012: 28); the famous battle cry ‘For Stalin, for the motherland’ reflected new ties to a Soviet homeland (*rodina*). The post-war environment was increasingly isolationist, militarist and xenophobic. Resentment at the way the West treated the USSR after 1945 and fear of subversive anti-Soviet elements, which were supposedly agents of Western imperialism, facilitated a shift in the USSR’s constituent other; from Nazi Germany to the perfidious West. Shelia Fitzpatrick characterised this Soviet identity as a ‘hybrid, combining pride in the Russian past and respect for

traditional culture with celebration of the party's leadership, the achievements of Soviet industrialisation, and the doctrines of Marxism-Leninism' (Fitzpatrick 1980: 67). To this can be added a strong focus on the threat from without and within, be it Trotskyism, Fascism, the lackeys of capitalist imperialism or 'rootless' cosmopolitanism (Davies 1997). As will be seen, elements of this version of national identity, which puts a strong focus on national security and stability, demanding vigilance against external and internal enemies, still play out in Russia today.

Stalinist mass identity was based not only on 'love for the motherland' but also coercion and fear. Mass terror ensured no serious challenges to this construct emerged, be it from the non-Russian national groups or the Russian heartland itself. Great injustices were done to non-Russian national groups in a series of brutal deportations and purges. The mass deportations from the Baltics, Western Ukraine, Belarus, Moldavia and the North Caucasus would leave poisonous sores unhealed beneath the 'Friendship of Nations' propaganda (See Conquest 1991). Russians themselves from all backgrounds were swept up into what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn famously termed the 'Gulag Archipelago' – a vast network of slave labour camps across the Union. This was a time when national identity could not be based on open discussions or become a genuine reflection of social memory; after the Great Terror and the post-war crackdown no such space existed. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1985: 452) put it in his famous *Gulag Archipelago*, 'the prolonged absence of any free exchange of information within a country opens up a gulf of incomprehension between whole groups (...) we simply *cease* to be a people, for we speak, indeed, different languages'. After Stalin's death in 1953, however, the USSR entered a new phase, where mass coercion was no longer acceptable. This led to a new and relative openness in identity politics, where nationality and Russianness could be discussed with more freedom.

### *After the Death of Stalin*

The Khrushchev thaw period was one where the Stalinist coercion was scaled back and, in conditions of relative freedom, forms of Russian national feeling found space for expression, resulting in a 'germination' stage for a new

direction in Russian national identity (Cosgrove 2004: 9). The ‘Village prose’ literary movement, inspired by ‘nostalgia for a vanished rural, ethnically Russian golden age’ (ibid: 14), allowed new discussions about Russia’s path in the so-called ‘thick journals’.<sup>16</sup> Now intellectuals could elaborate on the problems of Soviet society in ways that would have risked a death sentence under Stalin. Roughly speaking, two camps emerged, ‘liberals’ in journals such as *noviy mir*, and ‘conservatives’ in *nash sovremennik* and *molodaya gvardia* (Brudny 1998: 152). The liberal wing became known for opposition to militant isolationism and Stalinist methods. They attacked foundational texts as the *Short Course of the History of CPSU* as primitive. They lamented the destruction of Soviet avant-garde after the Stalinist turn and looked for return to ‘fundamental values’ and ‘worldwide humanism’ (English 2000: 185). The ‘conservative’ wing was a diverse collection of moderate and more radical elements, who shared concern for moral decline in the country but sought to preserve the USSR and avoid westernising reforms. Thus, in the thick journals the Westernizer-Slavophile debate returned once again, albeit buried deep in literary journals largely consumed by the Soviet intelligentsia.

Yitzak Brudny (1998) argued that the Soviet regime, unwilling after Khrushchev’s demise to rely on the most utopian parts of Marxist-Leninist ideology, looked to co-opt the Russophile writers of the thick journals by granting them a ‘golden straightjacket’. This offered the privileges and perks and inclusion into the intellectual elite, in return for conformity on the key points of official ideology and submission to requirements of the censor (Brudny 1998: 132). There was another side to this, however. After 1970, however, the KGB clamped down on those identified as more ‘threatening’, forcing an important part of the intelligentsia underground in *samizdat* publications, which Dina Zisserman-Brodsky (2003: 16) described as ‘enclaves of civil society in the totally censored world’. Geoffrey Hosking (2006: 358) argued this emerging civil society went further than *samizdat*; it included new ‘Russian’ mass movements concerned with the environment and cultural heritage of Russia (the RSFSR). One good example of this was VOPIK,

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<sup>16</sup> Although the Village Prose writers were not overtly hostile to the Soviet Union, these works went against the grain of socialist realism in art by portraying heroes returning to desolate rural homelands. It showed a *rodina* in decline and under threat, seemingly abandoned by those who were charged with its protection.

whose membership grew from 7 million by 1972 to 15 million by 1985 (Hosking 2006: 358).<sup>17</sup>

Overall, however, the USSR did not have a vigorous civil society in this period and political controls, combined with the previous damage wrought to society by Stalinist repression, halted the development of horizontal bonds across the population. It is important not to overestimate the influence of intellectuals, thick journals or new civic forms; ultimately, the vast majority of the population was not exposed to or aware of these debates. The RSFSR of the late seventies did not resemble in any way the bubbling social activity of solidarity-era Poland, where horizontal bonds began to emerge between intellectuals, workers and churchmen (Lewis 1994: 234-35). Instead, the vast majority were exposed to a Soviet meta-narrative on the emergence of a Soviet people in conditions of ‘Developed Socialism’, which came about as a result of the merging (*slianie*) of the USSR’s various national groups into one (Bassin, Kelly 2014: 4).

The Brezhnev regime was in its essence conservative, focused on the preservation of social order, stability and superpower status. J. R. Millar (1985) argued a conservative and paternalistic social contract (‘The Little Deal’) was in place between the Party and the people. The regime shelved radical utopian projects and offered citizens more space to pursue their own affairs, even if this meant tolerating petty corruption. In return, the ruled gave political passivity and loyalty to the party. The Brezhnev phase is of real importance to Russian national identity; memories of this ‘Little Deal’ are still strong in the population today. Large numbers recall these years as marked by stability and security, comfortable life conditions and faith in the future.

On the other hand, by the end of the 1970’s, significant socio-economic change had occurred in Russia (the RSFSR): the population became largely urban (70%) and unprecedented numbers gained access to higher education (Lewin 1988: 31). While there was social-economic change, the political system was frozen and the regime’s ideological constructs were insulated from any contestation. Approaching the perestroika period, a ‘tense stand-off’ existed

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<sup>17</sup> VOOPK ‘the All-Russian Society for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments’

both within the leadership and between it and the intelligentsia ‘over the path that the Soviet Union should take to renew its ideological appeal and improve the effectiveness of its social and economic system’ (Hosking 2006: 368). This stalemate would prove damaging and demoralising for many in the intelligentsia; lacking an open forum to debate Russia’s problems, many conservative intellectuals were faced with a stark choice: either remain silent but loyal to the Soviet state or make common cause for reform with their hated liberal rivals. Those in the liberal wing were also constrained by the limits of censorship that, if violated, would spell an end to one’s job, apartment and life prospects. With the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev, however, this deadlock was finally broken.

### *Perestroika and the collapse*

Gorbachev subsequently claimed that it was only upon taking office that he discovered the true extent of the rot in the USSR; it included not only economic stagnation but inferior healthcare, shockingly slack work practises, a falling birth rate and ever-present corruption across all levels. Nationalities policy, however, was an area he felt needed little attention. In his 1987 book *Perestroika*, he lauded Soviet progress: ‘Against the background of national strife, which has not spared even the world’s most advanced countries, the USSR represents a truly unique example in the history of human civilization in building a harmonious multi-ethnic state’ (Gorbachev 1987: 119). This was a continuation of Brezhnev-era rhetoric, which claimed the nationalities problem was ‘resolved completely’ (cited in Nahaylo, Swoboda, 1990). This optimism was shared by much of Soviet academia.<sup>18</sup> Yet, *glasnost* and *perestroika* exposed elements previously hidden behind the totalitarian monolithic façade (Bassin, Kelly 2014: 5-6). One was the unexpected vigour of ethno-cultural movements that soon demanded sovereignty for the national republics. This contradicted the claims of the Soviet authorities, which insisted a Soviet people had emerged even though ethnic and national cultures were simultaneously being preserved.<sup>19</sup> In the end, even the most sovietised nation of the union, the

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<sup>18</sup> A typical academic formulation was ‘The formation of a new historical community, the *sovietskii narod*, by no means entails the levelling out of specific national characteristics’ (Arutyunyan 1986: 433)

<sup>19</sup> To give one example, in 1981 Brezhnev announced: ‘We are against such tendencies that are directed towards the artificial wiping out of unique national characteristics. But to the same degree we consider the artificial inflation of such things to be unacceptable’ (Drobizheva 2013: 39).



Russians, started to agitate for the satisfaction of their own rights as a 'people'. Nation-ness came to dominate political discourse with shocking rapidity, despite the assumptions of so many that, as a force of popular mobilization, it had gone the way of the dodo.

Yet, in the first years, Gorbachev was blissfully unaware of nationalism's potential. Instead, he was confident of mobilizing conservative and liberal wings of the intelligentsia behind his regeneration programme. Appointing Yegor Ligachev as his unofficial 'second secretary', Gorbachev looked to win over conservatives in the Russian Writers Union and VOOPK. A new Andropov-style discipline campaign was combined with an anti-alcohol campaign. It seemed the leadership was finally heeding calls for a moral rebirth in Russia (Brudny 1998: 195), fighting the 'conspiracy to keep Russians drunk and stupid' (Duncan 2000: 116). The cancellation of a long-anticipated scheme to divert the Siberian rivers Ob and Irtysh in Northern Russia for the irrigation of Central Asia in 1986 can also be seen as a concession to Russophile conservatives.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, Gorbachev courted liberal 'westernisers'. Eventually disillusioned with the results of the above policies, Gorbachev turned decisively to the liberal camp during the second phase of perestroika, demoting Ligachev and appointing liberal reformers to the Ministry of Culture (O'Connor 2006: 87).

What followed was an intense proxy war of culture between conservatives and reformers in the media, bringing the neo-Slavophile/neo-Westerniser war of words out into the open. The liberals launched their offensive with the release of previously banned works from authors such as Grossman, Akhmatova, Solzhenitsyn and Pasternak. Readers were shocked by candid descriptions of life in Stalinist Russia; conservatives found themselves on the defensive, forced to justify the USSR. The conservative counter-attack focused on anti-Western themes: Pasternak and Nabokov were abhorrent and only loved in the perverted West; the increased presence of Western rock music was evidence of alien Western 'mass culture' that, in the words of *Nash Sovremennik*, would overwhelm Russia with 'filth, sex, murders, violence and cruelty' (O'Connor

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<sup>20</sup> A long campaign dating from the 1970's on the part of village prose writers such as Valentin Rasputin and Sergei Zalygin attacked the diversion scheme, demanding protection for 'the cultural heartland of the Russian nation, a key area in the formation and early history of the Russian state' (Petro 1987: 240).

2006: 96). The March 1988 letter of Leningrad Chemistry lecturer Nina Andreevna, entitled 'I Cannot Forsake my Principles', rejected efforts to present 'the slightest expressions of Great Russian national pride' as examples of the 'chauvinism of a great power' (Cited in O'Connor 2006: 119). The letter attacked the West and defended Stalinism, protecting Soviet-era myths about the war and upholding the merits of a Soviet civilization that was under assault. As Tolz (2001) noted, the rapid re-emergence of the Slavophile-Westerner debates during perestroika suggest the long-term importance of the West as a constituent 'Other' had not abated. Today it remains an important feature of Russian national identity; one of the contentions of this thesis is that the Slavophile-Westerniser debate will again re-emerge with new vigour after the current Putin consensus breaks down.

By the end of the 1980's, as the above cultural war of words drew to a close, it seemed public opinion and popular momentum was behind Yakovlev and the reformers. While the combined circulation of *Molodaya Gvarida*, *Moskva* and *Nash Sovremennik* was 1.6 million, the liberal journals *Noviy Mir*, *Znamya* and *Yunost* could boast a circulation of 6.6 million (Brudny 1998: 230). In the marketplace of ideas, it seemed the liberal reformers were beating conservatives and nationalists hands down. The latter appeared to lack a clear vision and were out of sync with the zeitgeist of the perestroika generation. From 1989 to 1991 the battleground shifted away from the war of words in journals into the newly opened arena of electoral politics and political factions. Here the conservatives suffered even more decisive defeats, both in the 1989 legislative elections, and the 1990 elections to the Supreme Soviet (Brudny 1998: 227).

Yet, the liberals could not convert their victories into political power; due to the diluted nature of Gorbachev's reforms, conservatives retained control of the Congress of People's Deputies and blocked the election of popular liberals to the Supreme Soviet. It is at this point that political actors began to employ nationalistic ideas of Russian sovereignty in their appeals to the electorate. Desperately in search of a political power base, Boris Yeltsin turned to the institutions of the RFSFR. In demanding a new level of sovereignty for Russia, Yeltsin tapped into a discourse, long maturing in the thick journals, of Russia

suffering from her position as ‘main donor republic’ in the USSR. This was inflamed and given temporary centrality after the sudden manifestations of nationalism in the non-Russian republics, which offended the sensibilities of many Russians.<sup>21</sup> Yeltsin undoubtedly fed off this sentiment to improve the prospects for his own political trajectory. He moved the discussion to whether it was time for more power to be devolved away from all-Union ministries and into new RSFSR institutions.

In the lead up to the 1990 elections Yeltsin added this ‘nationalist’ tint to his political message on Moscow radio: ‘the issue of primary importance is the spiritual, national and economic rebirth of Russia, which has been for long decades an appendage of the centre and which, in many respects, has lost its independence’ (Laba 1996: 8). The issue of Russian autonomy was used as a political weapon; a dramatic ‘Declaration of Sovereignty’ was passed in the Russian Congress of People’s Deputies, ensuring that Yeltsin remained in the political limelight (Hosking 2006: 383). Much of Yeltsin’s rhetoric tied in with Solzhenitsyn’s political pamphlet, *Rebuilding Russia*, which emerged in 1990, minus the focus on Russian Orthodoxy or demands to redraw the RSFSR’s borders (Solzhenitsyn, Klimoff 1991).

Yeltsin’s efforts culminated in the creation of the RSFSR Congress of Deputies and Supreme Soviet, an institutional power base from which Yeltsin and his followers could issue new laws. This brought about elections for a new RSFSR President, which Yeltsin duly won, becoming Russia’s first ever democratically elected leader on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 1991. At his inauguration he surrounded himself with symbols of the Russian nation: the flag hanging behind him was the Tsarist tricolour of red, white and blue and the song ‘*A Life for the Tsar*’ by Mikhail Glinka played in the background. In his speech he announced: ‘Great Russia is rising from her knees. We will, without fail, transform her into a prosperous, democratic, peaceful, law-abiding and sovereign state’ (O’Connor 2006: 257). After the August Coup, Yeltsin was catapulted into centre stage, leading the liberal reformers into power. The main

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<sup>21</sup> The most well-publicised example of these feelings came from Valentin Rasputin in the Congress of People’s Deputies in 1989: ‘Perhaps it would be better if Russia left the Union, considering that you blame her for all your misfortunes and consider that its weak development and awkwardness are what are burdening your progressive aspirations? Perhaps that would be better? This incidentally would help us solve many of our own problems, both present and future’ (cited in O’Connor 2006: 147).

losers were the various conservatives of the *Soiuz* anti-reform faction. Yeltsin moved to remove his last serious opponent, Gorbachev, and dissolved the USSR with the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus in December 1991.

While the above section has attempted to shed light on a highly complex period of Russian history, it neglects a vital part of the picture; how ordinary Russians reacted to these rapid changes. In his ethnography of the late Soviet period, Alexei Yurchak highlighted how rapid changes to ‘discursive conditions’ caused ‘a dynamic and powerful social system to abruptly and unexpectedly unravel’ (Yurchak 2006: 296). The question of how *Homo Sovieticus* responded to the end of this system is challenging to answer. While there was turbulence and rapid change at the political apex, there were low levels of mobilisation in the RSFSR. Unlike some of the non-Russian republics, the newly legalised *neformaly* in the RSFSR did not merge into one united, popular front. Mark Bessinger highlighted three main lines of mass mobilisation among Russians during perestroika: ‘nationalist-conservative, liberal-intellectual and labour-based economic’ (Bessinger 2002: 394). The first group involved the largely ethnic Russian *Interfront* movements in the Baltics and Moldavia, who came together under a platform of ‘saving the USSR’. Liberal mobilisation, on the other hand, remained an urban phenomenon in Moscow and Leningrad. The final group was largely confined to coal-mining regions of Western Siberia, Northern Kazakhstan and Eastern Ukraine.

Unlike Poland’s Solidarity movement, no force emerged to connect and co-ordinate these three mass movements. Russians seemed to respond slowly to the waves of national unrest that spread across the USSR. Ordinary people faced economic dislocation and hardship as reforms disrupted the systems of *blat* (personal connections) to which they were accustomed. At the same time, they had to endure attacks on the Soviet past, which exposed previously hidden tales of brutal repression. A 1988 article by Yuri Afanasiev argued Russians were stuck in an ‘ideological vacuum’ that was causing an ‘identity crisis’ (cited in Szporluk 1989:16). On top of this, it appeared they were hated by non-Russian nationalities for their ‘colonial occupier’ role.

While they were assaulted from all sides by bewildering change, it is also important to note some of the characteristics of Soviet Russians, which can be found in research done immediately after the collapse, which forwarded several important conclusions (Levada et al 1993). Firstly, Soviet Russians tended to lack feelings of belonging to an ethnic group and identified more with their *malaya rodina*<sup>22</sup> and the Soviet Union as a whole. Secondly, paternalistic views of the state predominated alongside a preference for a hierarchal society. Surprisingly there was no overwhelming support of collectivism. A readiness for individual gains was consistent but moderate; the study underlined that simplicity in desires and needs was common, perhaps offering an explanation of the stoic response to falling living standards in the 1990's. Much of this can be explained by the habits the Soviet people adopted over generations of authoritarianism: loyalty to the authorities is largely symbolic, the private sphere of family is prioritised, while, on the whole, very few demands are made of the authorities. The key objective for the Soviet person, as will be seen in the empirical chapters, is to *survive*; the willingness to endure hardship as long as certain minimums are met partially explains why Soviet Russians did not react more explosively to the rapid changes of 1988-1998.

Soviet Russians were also poorly prepared for participation in mass politics. When it came to the critical year of 1991, it seemed Russians supported *both* a continuation of the USSR with a new Union Treaty *and* increasing the prestige and power of the RSFSR institutions.<sup>23</sup> Many Russians seemed to view the USSR as the 'nation-state' of the Russians and did not desire its dissolution. The suggestion that the 'nationalism' of the periphery made the continuation of the USSR impossible was a shock. A chain of events, poorly understood by many, then and now, brought an end to the state they called their 'motherland'. Rather than emerging as the product of a coherent popular movement, the Russian Federation must have looked to some as the freak result of political miscalculations at the top of the Soviet political system. Hosking has made the

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<sup>22</sup> This translates as 'little homeland', which could mean village, town or region.

<sup>23</sup> Polling from VTsIOM (The All-Russian Centre of Study of Public Opinion) in May 1989 revealed that 63.4% of RSFSR respondents gave priority for preserving the 'unity and cohesion of the USSR'. On the other hand, only 10.2% of Balts agreed. A later poll done in May 1990 of 1,517 people in twenty areas of the RSFSR showed 43% demanding 'Russia should receive political and economic independence from the USSR' (Dunlop 1993: 62).

very valid point that ‘as a political entity, Russia came into being as a negative: “not-the-USSR”’ (Hosking 2006: 388). Emil Pain also highlighted the challenge for Russia’s post-Soviet leaders: ‘How can a single positive identity form among inhabitants of a state that is regarded both by the authorities and the public as an unexpected, illegitimate child, a cripple, the victim of a catastrophe or plot?’ (Pain 2009: 15). Given the complexities behind this collapse and way ordinary people became alienated from political developments, it would prove tempting for some people subsequently to explain the collapse in terms of an anti-Russian conspiracy; a ‘stab in the back’ myth that also emerges in the empirical chapters of the thesis.

### *Conclusion*

The above review has covered two ‘empires’ that both, for contrasting reasons, collapsed. In both of these states the tension between ‘empire’ and ‘nation’ was important. In describing both as empires, I refer to a supranational state claiming a civilizational identity that seeks to ‘manage’ the ‘nationalism’ of ‘subject’ peoples. In both cases, the size and diversity of these states made national integration a serious challenge, whether it was along the lines of a ‘nationalising empire’ or a ‘Sovietisation’. In the periods of Uvarov and Stalin, the authorities increasingly relied on a Russian ethno-cultural core in their nation-building efforts and emphasised the ‘imperial’ traditions of the state. Both treated ‘nationalism’ as a threat to state-building in a large multiethnic space, leading to ambiguous stances both towards local non-Russian ethnic and cultural identities and the role of the largest ethnic group, the Russians.

The vital difference between the two is that, while Romanov nation-building was attempted in conditions of peaceful economic development and relatively open spaces for public discussions, Stalinist efforts were part of a social engineering project of unprecedented scale involving mass terror, the forced resettlement of millions, constant mobilization and, eventually, war on a scale unrivalled in modern history. While Tsarist nation-building foundered on the rocks of war exhaustion and revolution, Stalinist nation-building successfully defeated the worst invasion Russia has ever suffered. Importantly, it was in the Stalin years that large numbers of Russians began to identify with the USSR as

their *rodina* (motherland), taking the whole of the Soviet Union to be their nation-state. Russian national identity was dominated by Stalinist Russocentric statism infused with components not unfamiliar to today's Russia: consider the strength of anti-Western feeling, the pride in felt in being a self-sufficient and mighty world power, the identification with a strong leader and rejection of political opposition and factionalism. These 'Fortress Russia' statist tendencies re-emerge in the empirical chapters as an important discursive formation in Russian mainstream nationalism today.

Yet, as Solzhenitsyn pointed out, Stalin's Soviet nation lacked a vital component: people could not talk to one another. As a result nation-building lacked a genuine and organic discursive element. The 'nation' was fossilised into its a xenophobic Stalinist statist form held together by the fear of violence. Nonetheless, after Stalin's death, Russians started talking to one another far more, the 'nation' as a discursive formation, whatever the limitations, became possible beyond the confines of the Kremlin's propaganda machine. When Stalinist controls were relaxed a generation became enthused with the challenge of building communism and Russians were at the vanguard of this. The regime looked to secure the support of the Russian intelligentsia in this effort, although co-option was often combined with coercion when certain figures crossed the line of acceptable discourse. Although the Slavophile/Western split of the pre-revolutionary years re-emerged in the thick journals, the same cannot be said of the population at large. Of all the national groups of the USSR, it can be argued it was the Russians who became the most 'Soviet' and the least likely to view the 'Friendship of Peoples' in a critical light. The systematic terroristic violence of the Stalinist period, where Russians suffered no less than any other group, was important in shaping *Homo Sovieticus*. A whole generation was taught it was helpless in face of the mighty state. This deterred them not only from political activity but even independent thought.

The post-Stalin years did not fundamentally change this; although state violence was scaled back, we cannot view the long 'stagnation' period (1964-1982) as one where ordinary people were encouraged to voice opinions or the independent-minded brought into leadership positions. Instead, this was a

phase of political demobilization, where Russians were encouraged to turn their back on politics. Although the prerequisites for the modern 'nation' such as urbanisation, industrialisation, modern transport and mass literacy were in place, the regime 'froze' the political and cultural environment. This partially explains why when reform was initiated 'from above', the great mass of Russians were unwilling or perhaps unable to participate. Paternalism and passivity, two interlinked phenomena, are important features of the 'Soviet man' that still resonate in today's Russia.

In the first years of Russia's new post-Soviet era, many assumed that Russia would be able to easily 'overcome' Soviet legacies and 'join the West'. This was central to Yeltsin's platform and, after his consolidation of power, he rather distanced himself from the nationalistic ethno-cultural language he had occasionally used during his political ascendancy. In the next section, I will examine post-Soviet nation-building 'from above', bringing us from the collapse of the USSR to the current day, highlighting the challenges faced, first by Yeltsin, then by Vladimir Putin, in building a common national identity for post-Soviet Russians.

### **Literature Review Part Two: Russian Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Context.**

The first part of this section offers an interpretation of a vital period in Russian national identity today, the decade of Boris Yeltsin's leadership. The second unpacks in more detail how, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, a clear direction has emerged in the promotion of a certain version of the Russian nation. The evolution of post-Soviet Russia is a great demonstration of how the 'imagined' national community that crystallizes and solidifies in one period, can quickly reconstitute into new forms. The disintegration of Marxist-Leninism, after a long phase of decline as an accepted worldview within communist societies, left a vacuum to be filled. In the immediate post-1991 phase, many shared a 'naive and romantic faith in the wonders of democracy, capitalism and nationalism', and elites set about to use these ideas to build new loyalties (Suny 2012: 33). In Russia, subsequent disappointment and frustration with post-Soviet realities have led to a new phase in identity, one that reflects



on Russia's decline as a great power, the loss of Soviet certainties and resentment at the way relations have worked out with the West and the former-communist states.

### *Building the Post-Soviet Russian nation: The Yeltsin years*

Upon becoming the first leader of Russia after the USSR, Boris Yeltsin inherited serious problems. On one hand, as the largest post-Soviet state, Russia inherited 76% of USSR territory, 61% of its GNP, 51% of population (Sakwa 2008: 36). On the other hand, the state of the Soviet economy in the final months of the USSR was critical; in November 1990 food shortages had compelled Gorbachev to send his foreign minister to beg \$1 billion in commodity credits from Washington (Reddaway, Glinksi 2001: 278). It was from this less than promising starting point that the new government attempted to simultaneously jump through several transitions that had taken place in the West over many centuries; nation-building, democratisation, market reform, capitalist accumulation and building civil society. In this, the challenge was to overcome Soviet backwardness and become 'Western'. The Yeltsin leadership centred their legitimacy claims on anti-communism, presenting the Russian people with a simple dichotomy: 'either you are with us moving into the future or with the communists going back in time'.

Yet, this narrative of entering Western civilization and enjoying the fruits of prosperity and modernity was soon contradicted by stark new realities. The Yeltsin period was one of appalling socio-economic decline. Russian GDP declined by 44% from 1992 to 1998, almost double the 24% drop in Soviet GDP that occurred during the Nazi invasion. Meanwhile, capital investment fell to 20% of 1990 levels (Reddaway, Glinksi 2001: 249).<sup>24</sup> The demographic statistics were shocking; over 1992-2000 the Russian population fell by 2.8 million, with male life expectancy reduced from 64 in the 1980's to 57 in 1994.<sup>25</sup> It is not surprising that given these conditions 'many Russians came to identify "democracy" with poverty and degradation' (Hosking 2006: 392). The immediate experience of the post-Cold War order resembled the fate of a

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<sup>24</sup> In addition, by 1998, around 80% of Russian farms and 70,000 factories had been liquidated and, according to the World Bank, the number living below the poverty line exploded from two million in 1989 to 72 million by the mid-nineties (Klein 2007: 237-238).

<sup>25</sup> These figures are made even starker when one factors in the three million 'ethnic' Russians that entered the Russian Federation from the Near Abroad in the same period (1990-1999) (Pain 2004: 36).

country defeated in war, although in this case much of the damage was done *after* ‘defeat’ in the Cold War. Rather than the sudden destruction of bombs and bullets, neoliberal reforms and a domestic kleptocracy dismantled the social protections of the Soviet system and oversaw apparent Russia’s slide into third world status.

Thus, it is in this context that the limitations of Yeltsin-era nation-building must be assessed. Given the increasing unpopularity of Yeltsin and rising nostalgia for the certainties of Soviet times, it is perhaps unsurprising that the new authorities found it difficult to rally people around the symbols and rhetoric of the new state. Russia’s pre-Soviet past was haphazardly mined for symbols of the new Russian Federation. The double-headed eagle returned, along with the imperial flag. Yeltsin participated in the ceremonial reburial of the last imperial family in St. Petersburg’s Peter and Paul Fortress, where he called the Bolshevik execution ‘one of the most shameful episodes’ in Russian history that demonstrated a valuable lesson: ‘Any attempt to change life through violence is condemned to failure’.<sup>26</sup>

This ‘anti-Soviet’ narrative was combined with the rhetoric of civic inclusiveness, a process that aimed to convert ‘Soviet people’ into citizens of the Russian Federation. Yeltsin explicitly underlined the civic and non-ethnic basis of Russianness. The Russian Constitution of 1993 addressed a ‘multi-national people’ (*mnogonatsional’nyy narod*) and the population was referred to as *rossiyane* (citizens of Russia) rather than *russkie* (ethnic Russians) (Duncan 2000: 131). Furthermore, Soviet ethno-federal structures were adopted with little alteration in the Russian Federation, with Yeltsin leaning toward what has been described as ‘ethnic *laissez faire*’ in the devolution of powers to regional elites (Rutland 2010: 120). Efforts to build a civic Russian identity, however, suffered greatly in the context of economic hardship and a discredited democratic polity. Struggling to build legitimacy on the foundations of anti-communism and civic Russianness, in 1996 Yeltsin even created a competition in order to find a new ‘national idea’ for the country (Urban 1998: 969). Yet, this initiative ultimately failed to produce anything

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/18/world/last-czar-buried-tale-of-2-russias.html>

substantial. All in all, the expected rapid transformation of *Homo Sovieticus* failed to occur.

Arguably the Yeltsin years made more progress in state-building and elite consolidation of power than nation-building. Opposition to shock therapy reforms crystallised in parliament under the leadership of Ruslan Khasbulatov and his Civic Union coalition and, in March 1993, they voted to repeal Yeltsin's special powers of decree. Yeltsin responded by declaring a state of emergency, gambling that 'the level of public cynicism and apathy had become so great (...) that widespread active support for its opponents would not be forthcoming' (McDaniel 1996: 182). The crisis ended with Yeltsin essentially carrying out a coup in October 1993, removing the legislatures at federal, regional and local level, all of which were pillars of an infant Russian democracy (Reddaway, Glinksy 2001: 372). The post-1993 regime bought stability at the price of legitimacy; the events of 1993 cemented popular alienation from politics; only 46% of the electorate voted in the December 1993 elections, with 12.8% voting against all candidates and 4.8% destroying their ballots (ibid: 348). The post-1993 constitution affirmed the power of the executive and removed virtually all checks and balances against it; the promise of a post-Soviet democratic transition was thus in tatters from an early stage.<sup>27</sup>

This top-heavy statist structure helped not only to reproduce many of the problematic elements of the Soviet state system; it also encouraged bureaucratic parasitism in the form of rent-seeking.<sup>28</sup> One good way to describe what emerged is 'state-apparatchik-oligarchic capitalism', within which a significant organised crime element was enmeshed (Brudny et al 2004: 40). The new ruling class included a small club of new billionaires known as the 'oligarchs' who, in co-operation with Western fund managers, took part in the stripping of capital out of Russia at a rate of \$2 billion a month. In 1991 Russia had no billionaires. By 2003 that number had risen to seventeen (Klein 2007: 57).

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<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting the Western powers did not withdraw their support for the embattled president and the U.S. Congress even voted to give Yeltsin \$2.5 billion in aid during the tense stand-off with parliament, essentially condoning his shelling of the Russian legislature.

<sup>28</sup> This can be described as seeking 'profits from the movement of goods and services – licensing, duties, taxes, mark-ups on turnover, bribes and protection payments – rather than from (taxing) production' (Urban et al 1997: 295).

Approaching the 1996 elections, economic hardship, the debacle of the First Chechen War and Yeltsin's declining image, meant the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) were poised to make serious gains. With the backing of Russia's richest men Yeltsin, and widespread electoral violations with campaign costs over \$100 million, Yeltsin saw off the communist resurgence.<sup>29</sup> The final result in the second round of voting brought no landslide; Yeltsin won 53.8% of the vote (40 million) versus Zyuganov's 40.5% (30 million) (Duncan 2000: 138). It can be argued that 1996 was the beginning of 'managed democracy'; the sustained use of state and oligarch resources to subvert the democratic process. Those voting for the CPRF were clearly roused by the sense Russia had been corrupted by venal oligarchs and self-serving bureaucrats. The economic meltdown in 1998, leading to a devaluation of the Rouble and more deprivation for the bulk of Russia's citizens, only served to stoke feelings of injustice in the population.

Overall, it is easy to understand how people came to view the Yeltsin years in terms of multiple failures. This includes the failure to build a democratic system, to promote a new Russian identity, to enter the 'civilized' world, to bring prosperity to Russia, to rebuild Russian military or industrial strength. Russians lost the best aspects of Soviet life while gaining the worst excesses of Western 'bandit' capitalism. While the Soviet empire crumbled, transition into the 'First World' failed, leaving many alienated and frustrated. The 'successes' of this period were more dubious from the point of view of ordinary Russians: power and property were transferred to a reconstituted elite, an executive-dominated political system was built, communist and nationalist forces were held in check and no popular disturbances arose to challenge the new system. The experience of 1988-1998 is vital to understanding how and why Vladimir Putin was able to emerge from obscurity to become a genuinely popular leader over a sustained period of time.

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<sup>29</sup> This broke the legal limit of \$2.9 million. The campaign involved extensive touring around the country making massive promises of government spending and support for individual projects in the regions. It has been estimated that these promises, fulfilled after victory, cost a shocking \$10 billion to the Russian Treasury (Reddaway, Glinksi 2001: 514-515).

## The Putin years

It is revealing that the new president's first decree upon entering office was a measure to protect the ex-President from prosecution. The establishment of Putin as president was carefully planned from above and controversy still surrounds events prior to his appointment.<sup>30</sup> Yeltsin's sudden resignation on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1999 was timed to allow Putin to capitalize on his temporary popularity from the Second Chechen War and hold successful elections. From the outset, the mood of the country at the end of the nineties differed sharply from what prevailed at the start of the decade. Public opinion had shifted with regards the fateful year of 1991; rather than viewing it as 'the birth of a free Russia' it came to be seen as 'the collapse of the USSR'. 'Liberalism', 'democracy' and 'reform' became anathemas to the general public, connected as they were to the travails of the Yeltsin years.<sup>31</sup>

Putin moved to distance himself from the anti-communist and pro-Western ideological language of the Yeltsin period, restoring the Soviet anthem and reclaiming some of the 'Soviet' parts of Russianness without making clear statements of a radical change of course. In 1996 Yeltsin claimed that 'the communist project could not stand the test of time... the Soviet Union failed under the weight of universal crisis due to economic, political and social contradictions.' By 2005 the *zeitgeist* of the country had changed to such an extent that Putin felt comfortable asserting: 'we should acknowledge that the collapse of the USSR was the major geopolitical disaster of the twentieth century' (Panov 2010: 93). In some ways, Putin's pandering to Soviet nostalgia can be understood as posturing to the electorate; bringing an end to rhetorical de-Sovietization was popular in older voters. Yet, Putin's version of the 'post-Soviet' nation is more than Soviet nostalgia. In order to unpack it further, I examine four areas of nationalist claim-making: (a) forging a common historical memory; (b) fostering a common civic identity; (c) bolstering the legitimacy of those that lead the nation; (d) promoting a geopolitical vision of Russia in world affairs.

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<sup>30</sup> On August 5<sup>th</sup> 1999, a small band of Islamists led by Shamil Basaev entered Dagestan with the apparent intention of sparking an anti-Russian uprising. Putin was appointed Prime Minister on August 9<sup>th</sup> and in the following month bombs went off in apartments in Buynaksk, Moscow, and Volgograd, killing 293 people and injuring 651. This provided official pretext for the Second Chechen War; the conflict vital to the rapid rise of Putin's reputation and political legitimacy (Reddaway, Glinksi 2001: 614).

<sup>31</sup> A 2000 survey showed 45% of respondents selected 'nothing good' as the main achievement of the Yeltsin era (Petukhov, Ryabov 2004: 273) while a 1999 Levada Centre poll showed half thought multi-party politics had done more harm than good (Lukin 2009:74).

## *Historical memory*

On one level, Putin-era memory policy is characterised by ambiguity towards the Soviet period. On the other hand, it involves clear efforts to build a patriotic ‘useable past’ by weaving together a *bricolage* of pre-revolutionary, Soviet and post-Soviet elements. Ambiguity to the Soviet past can be found in measures to commemorate the victims of Soviet repression, such as Putin’s 2007 visit to the Butovo Memorial south of Moscow in October 2007, where he paid his respects albeit without directly referring to the crimes committed this site.<sup>32</sup> Putin said the victims of this repression were ‘people with their own ideas (...) unafraid of speaking out (...) they were the cream of the nation’.<sup>33</sup> In 2015 Moscow’s Gulag Museum was reopened in an impressive and larger venue with the support of Moscow local government in October of that year to commemorate the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repression, an official public holiday instituted in 1991.<sup>34</sup> This was followed by the passing of a long-prepared law ‘On the Rehabilitation of the Victims of Political Repression’ in March 2016, which resulted in an additional 3.5 million ‘enemies of the Soviet state’ being rehabilitated.<sup>35</sup> Thus, a consistent direction is visible in recognising the horrors of Stalinist repression and encouraging the story of the victims to be included in Russia’s historical memory.

These measures, however, have been accompanied by other policies working in a rather different direction. The historian Alexei Miller (2014) argued 2014 was a watershed year when ‘the established sites and forms of dialogue and co-operation in the field of historical memory were destroyed’. It was in this year, for example, that plans for a Stalin museum were announced, whose exhibits will focus on Stalin’s contribution to victory and his role in the rebirth of the Russian Orthodox Church, neatly side-stepping Stalinist wartime errors and wide scale repression.<sup>36</sup> In the same year of the Gulag Museum’s expansion in Moscow, one of the very few museums operating on a former Gulag site,

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<sup>32</sup> It was on this site that, in August 1937, the first mass executions of the Great Terror were carried out by the NKVD, resulting in over 20,000 confirmed deaths <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1078080.html>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-purges/putin-honors-stalin-victims-70-years-after-terror-idUSL3072723020071030>

<sup>34</sup> [https://rbth.com/arts/2015/11/05/gulag-museum-in-moscow-gets-new-building\\_537307](https://rbth.com/arts/2015/11/05/gulag-museum-in-moscow-gets-new-building_537307)

<sup>35</sup> According to one of the law’s authors, given the economic pressures of 2016, the legislation could not offer previously-planned victims financial compensation due to the current budget difficulties of the state. <https://meduza.io/feature/2016/10/18/gosudarstvo-dolzno-bylo-izvinitnya>

<sup>36</sup> The museum will be in Rzhev, Tver Oblast, and is funded by the Russian Military-Historical Society, which is led by Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/26901629.html>

Perm-36, was shut down after pressure from the local authorities and vague accusations of 'extremism' among the museum's organisers.<sup>37</sup> On top of this, in April 2014 a new law was ratified against the 'Rehabilitation of Nazism' that, among other things, makes it an offence to 'spread flagrant lies about the military activities of the anti-Hitler coalition during World War Two'.<sup>38</sup> It remains to be seen how far the legislation will be used to curtail historical writings of an anti-Stalinist flavour. Overall, it appears there is increasing space for more positive portrayals of Stalin, perhaps reflecting the desire of many Russians to downplay the question of repression and focus more in taking pride in him as a wartime leader.

The ambiguity about the Stalinist past may be connected to the desire to protect the memory of the Second World War, which can be viewed as the centre piece of state policy and aspirations to fostering unity and patriotism in the population via historical memory. Extensive polling has shown that all generations of Russians seem to regard it as the most important event in the country's twentieth century history (Laruelle 2011: 233) and the biggest source of national pride about the past (Sperling 2009:239). Increasing amounts of state resources have been spent on commemorating the victory. A new pomp is visible in Victory Day ceremonies with the omnipresent presence of orange and black ribbons. In recent years, the Victory Day celebrations have become a truly mass phenomenon with the state's co-opting of the grass-roots 'immortal regiment' movement (*bessmertnyy polk*), which emerged in Tomsk in 2012, where TV-2 station supported the march of over 6000 people carrying portraits of relatives who had participated in the war. In the following years it spread to other Russian towns with 30,000 turning out in St. Petersburg in 2014. In 2015, the event was led for the first time by the state as part of the seventieth anniversary celebrations. These administrative resources helped bring out over four million into the streets of Russia, including 500,000 in Moscow alone.<sup>39</sup>

While there is significant ambiguity about the Soviet past, a concerted effort is visible in building a patriotic view of Russia's history, one that could unite her historical story into a comprehensible whole, a 'useable past'. At the heart of

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<sup>37</sup> <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russias-gulag-museum-shuts-doors-amid-mounting-state-pressure-44401>

<sup>38</sup> [http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/04/140404\\_nazism\\_duma\\_punishment](http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/04/140404_nazism_duma_punishment)

<sup>39</sup> <http://moypolk.ru/letopis-polka>

this narrative is the view that Russia is the legal heir of a 1000-year tradition of statehood, with continuity in her historical path from Kievan Rus, through the Russian Empire and the USSR up to the current moment (Malinova 2014b). One of the central means of propagating this 1000-year narrative has been through the issuance of new history textbooks, where the authorities have pushed for the creation of one, standardised textbook. The Kremlin's endorsement of Alexander Filippov's *'The Modern History of Russia: 1945-2006: A Teacher's Handbook'* has produced a great deal of controversy. While it did not subsequently become widely used in Russian schools, Filippov's handbook can be seen as the precursor to the creation of 'Unified Textbook on History', a 2013 initiative that is still labouring to produce a definitive textbook that, according to Putin, should be written 'within the framework of a single unified concept'.<sup>40</sup> In their discourse analysis of Russia's current textbooks, Levintova and Butterfield (2010) found increasing consensus on three areas of recent history that were connected to the 'lessons' of Russia's 1000-year history: (i) centralisation is positive and necessary to avoid a repeat of the 1991 collapse that came as a result of the 'legal nihilism of the regional elites' (ibid: 145) (ii) 'cowardly' foreign policies (such as those of 1990's) are condemned (ibid: 154) (iii) Putin's impact is seen as positive, strengthening the state, 'solving' the Chechen question, providing positive economic growth and introducing a positive, assertive foreign policy' (ibid: 156).

Trends in education textbooks are reinforced by other measures, such as changing the name of the public holiday 'the Day of Accord and Conciliation' to 'Unity Day'. This shifted the focus to the heroic figures of Minin and Pozharsky, who were central in expelling Polish invaders and ending the 'Time of Troubles.' This new focus encouraged citizens to look back to distant ancestors who had united against an external enemy to preserve Russian statehood as it faced its darkest hour. This encouraged identification with medieval Russian patriots, displaying their acts as a model for today's Russians. In a recent polemical essay, Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov (2016) outlined his own commitment to a *longue durée* view of Russian history, weaving together the high civilization of Kievan Rus', the struggle

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<sup>40</sup> <https://rg.ru/2013/04/25/uchebnik-anons.html>



with the Golden Horde, victory over Napoleon and Soviet achievements into one coherent narrative that highlights the positive role Russia has played in global affairs while underlining how, in much of this, the ‘West’ has sought to undermine the country’s efforts. Above all, this useable past encourages Russians identify with a long period of Russian statehood that crosses seamlessly from feudal Muscovy, the Russian Empire and the socialist Soviet Union. In many ways, this reduces national identity to loyalty to the state and pride in its strength, buttressing a conservative worldview. This *longue durée* view of Russian history is one that will be returned to in the empirical chapter on popular historical memory ‘from below’.

### *Building a common civic identity*

Following on from Yeltsin’s abortive efforts to forge a civic identity based on the pillars of anti-communism, Western-style civic inclusivist language and the promise of Russia’s post-Soviet transformation, Putin’s first decade was marked by ambiguity. Oxana Shevel (2011) described Russia’s nationality or ethnic policies as ‘purposefully ambiguous’. This muddled picture is made all the more challenging due to the difficulties and ambiguities in certain key terminology used in the Russian context. First of all, in Russian language two adjectives exist for the term ‘Russian’ – the first is *rossiyskii* and is more connected with civic, non-ethnic belonging to a state, while the second, *russkii*, is more about ethnic, linguistic and cultural Russianness. This duality tempts many observers to locate signs that the Kremlin is moving closer to one or the other definition of Russianness.

However, Shevel (2011: 199) concluded that alterations to Russia’s ‘Compatriots Policy’ were merely a ‘legalisation of vagueness’; in other words no decisive measures had been taken to revitalise Yeltsin’s sterile and muddled *rossiyskii* civic identity project. Peter Rutland (2010) referred to these policies in terms of the ‘presence of absence’; rather than seriously cultivating either the civic or ethnic aspects of Russian identity, Putin has made ‘state power’ the ‘object of veneration’ (Rutland 2010: 124). Overall, both authors argue that the Kremlin’s conceptual murkiness allows the leadership to appeal to different segments at the same time without having to offer any ideological

commitments by which future performance may be measured (Shevel 2011, Rutland 2010).

Events in 2010, however, pushed questions of patriotism, interethnic harmony and nationalism to the forefront in Russia, raising serious doubts over the state's management of this area. In 2010, after the rioting of right-wing football fans on Manezhnaya Ploshad resulted in deaths, President Medvedev underlined that 'interethnic conflicts are lethal for Russia, no matter where they occur' and affirmed 'All peoples should learn to live together. It is difficult, but our is no stranger to that. Our country is truly, really multinational.'<sup>41</sup> In January 2012, Putin dedicated an entire article to the 'National Question'. The article opened with a discussion of the 'general failure of European multiculturalism', to which the Russian experience compared favourably: 'Russia is neither an ethnic state, nor an American "melting pot" in which everyone is, one way or another, an immigrant. Russia emerged and has developed for centuries as a multi-ethnic (*mnogonatzional'noe*) state' (Putin 2012: 2). Putin claimed ethnic nationalism was a virus and rejected nationalist slogans, such as 'Stop feeding the North Caucasus', as irresponsible and only likely to bring calls to stop 'feeding' Siberia, the Urals and the Far East (ibid: 3) and, thus, bring about the collapse of the country.

Putin also outlined the unique features of Russia as a multinational state, where the Russians (*russkie*) play the role of the 'state-forming people central to the very existence of Russia' whose 'great mission' is to 'unite and hold together a civilization' in the Eurasian space. As with the Soviet 'Friendship of Nations', the Russians sit at the top of the ethno-cultural hierarchy, encouraging the peaceful integration of 'smaller' nations into a large and powerful state. Thus, Putin attaches a certain civilizational identity to Russianness 'based on culture not ethnicity'. Thus, a new neo-imperial and statist flavour was outlined that also utilised elements of civic patriotism. Luke March (2012: 411) pointed out the continuity Russian 'official nationalism' has with Tsarist and Soviet traditions in that it is a 'conservative nationalism that venerates, justifies and is subordinate to state interests' while being 'primarily focused on achieving internal stability (...) in face of external threats'.

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<sup>41</sup> <https://www.rt.com/politics/ethnic-conflicts-lethal-medvedev/>

Since the Ukraine crisis, however, the increased usage of *russkii* in state discourse has led some to conclude the Kremlin is ready to move from ‘statist’ and ‘civic’ rhetoric’ to ‘ethno-nationalism’ (Tepel 2015, Blakkisrud 2016). This can be seen in references in state speeches and media to the ‘*russkie* in Ukraine’, Crimea as ‘*russkaya* land’ and Sevastopol as a *russkii* town. Speaking in September 2015, Putin himself highlighted how ‘*russkie*’ had lived in one country as one family and were split up suddenly and unexpectedly in 1991, leading to Russia becoming the ‘largest divided nation in the world today’.<sup>42</sup> Thus, a well-worn piece of ethnic nationalist discourse was finally adopted by a leading state figure.

Nonetheless, this should not be taken as clear cut evidence of ethnic nationalism; the adjective *russkii* has a powerful supra-ethnic meaning inherited from the Imperial and Soviet periods. As Marlene Laruelle (2016) recently argued, the term *russkii* is more often used by Putin in two clearly non-ethnic ways: (i) a ‘way to underline the historical unity of the Eastern Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians)’ (ii) and ‘as an appellation to the messianic historical purpose of Russia’.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the term *russkii* has long roots of ambiguity and Putin is able to use it without contradicting the principle of Russia as a multi-ethnic state.<sup>44</sup> In this reading *russkii* and *rossiyskii* do not have a clear conflict, one affirms a civic, multi-ethnic state, the other refers to an imperial unified state and common cultural code.

A. Verkhovsky and E. Pain (2012) have termed Putin’s solution to the construction of a common Russian identity as ‘civilizational nationalism’, one that uses neo-imperial language and claims to civilizational distinctiveness to consolidate Russian society in place of ethno-cultural nationalism (which would cause separatism and instability in multi-ethnic Russia) and civic national identity (which is difficult given the lack of independent civic institutions and active civil society). This is supported by a neo-traditional discourse (Stepanova 2015) that has resulted in policies aimed at protecting traditional family values, respect for religion and strengthening Russian

<sup>42</sup> <http://tass.ru/politika/2295134>

<sup>43</sup> [http://www.ponarseurasia.org/ru/memo/201601\\_Laruelle](http://www.ponarseurasia.org/ru/memo/201601_Laruelle)

<sup>44</sup> This is because *russkii* here is about the imperial past where *russkii* is an adjective connected to Kievan *Rus*’ and the idea of unity between the Eastern Slavic peoples in one state – ‘for the Russian authorities the word ‘*russkii*’ serves as a reminder of a common historical past for all the descendants of Kievan Rus’ (Laurelle 2016).

language and culture. These include the banning of ‘homosexual propaganda’, restrictions on abortion, making divorce more expensive and criminalizing ‘insults to religious feelings’. Elena Stepanova (2015: 122) has pointed out that much of the rhetoric in the two key official documents of Russia’s neo-traditional turn (The Ministry of Culture’s ‘The Basics of State Cultural Policy’ and the Orthodox Church’s ‘The Basic Values – The Fundamentals of National Identity’) are both infused with the Soviet-era language of the Communist Party’s ‘Moral Code of the Builder of Communism’. In some ways this discourse is also an attempt to flesh out what makes Russia a distinct country from the West, returning us to the Slavophile-Westernizer debate. The above outlines a neo-Slavophile vision of Russianness that has yet to be converted into a coherent state ideology but contains elements of Russia’s Tsarist and Soviet heritage.

### *Legitimising the state in leading the nation*

From the outset, the key difference in Putin’s presentation of the state’s role from that of Yeltsin was his focus on the importance of a strong state as the ultimate guarantor of order and stability. As Putin expressed it: ‘From the very beginning, Russia was created as a super-centralised state. That’s practically laid down in its genetic code, its traditions and the mentality of its people.’<sup>45</sup> As a corollary to this, internal unity was demanded; critics and fault-finders were seen to be treacherous; ‘Those who oppose us need a weak, sick state, a disorientated, divided society, so that behind its back they can get up to their dirty deeds and profit at your and my expense.’<sup>46</sup> This drive to centralise was pursued through the expansion of a ‘power vertical’, which, among other things, involved reasserting central authority in Russia’s regions. This was linked to the claim that the post-1991 decentralisation had caused state disintegration. In his first presidential address in 2000 Putin announced that in Russia was still not a fully-fledged federal state’ due to excessive decentralisation, where a ‘power vacuum has led to state functions being seized by private corporations and clans’.<sup>47</sup> In his second address of 2001, he asserted that ‘the period of state breakdown is behind us. A stop has been put

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<sup>45</sup> cited in (Evans 2008: 903)

<sup>46</sup> President Putin was speaking in Dec 2007 prior to parliamentary elections, cited in (Evans 2008: 904)

<sup>47</sup> <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21480>

to the disintegration of the state that I spoke of in last year's address'.<sup>48</sup> This language of 'statism' prioritises the preservation and strengthening of the state in order for it to play a primary role in running the economy and providing social services.

The second aspect of Putin's presentation of the state came in the form of a new political brand termed 'Managed Democracy' or 'Sovereign Democracy'.<sup>49</sup> The central idea of this was that the Western experience of democracy was not applicable to Russia and that the West could not be relied upon to be an effective tutor in this question. Well-known political scientist Sergei Karaganov has argued that 'sovereign democracy' was introduced as a new model for semi-authoritarian developmental states to follow as an alternative to developed liberal-democratic Western states (see Evans 2008: 909). This was informed by a somewhat Darwinian view of the world where only strong states can prevail, injecting a polarity between countries who were 'great powers' and those who were weak and dependent on the West, therefore not 'sovereign' (ibid).

Thus, out of the ashes of the 'three-worlds' Cold War system, a new reconfiguration emerges, where the BRIC countries replace the communist bloc countries as the 'second world' challenging the West. The vital difference here is that this 'second world' is not offering an alternative to the liberal order of the West as such; instead it demands the end of 'second class status' of sovereign nations such as Brazil, India, China and Russia. In a 2005 address Putin declared: 'Russia is a country that has chosen democracy through the will of its own people... As a sovereign nation, Russia can and will decide for itself the timeframe and conditions for its progress along this road.'<sup>50</sup>

The announcement of the new 'Sovereign Democracy' doctrine went hand in hand with new measures to 'manage' post-Soviet democracy by limiting the role of political opposition while cementing the dominance of United Russia. New electoral regulations from 2006 made it much harder for opposition parties to register (Sakwa 2008: 143), while United Russia party membership

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<sup>48</sup> <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21216>

<sup>49</sup> The phrase 'Sovereign Democracy' was coined by Kremlin ideologist Vladislav Surkov.

<sup>50</sup> <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>

shot up from 35,000 in 2001 to 1.5 million in 2007 (ibid: 145). United Russia can be described as a ‘party of power’ in that it promotes presidential prerogatives in the legislature and is propped up by extensive use of state resources and presidential patronage (Smith 2012: 122).

Tightening control of the political system, however, is only part of the picture. A key feature of Putin-era politics was the sense of *quid pro quo* where ‘in return for opting out of politics and leaving such matters in the hands of the current power-brokers, the Russian people will receive material well-being and be able to be full of pride in their country’ (Laruelle 2009: 25). A variety of Russian analysts have referred to this as a ‘social contract’ between the electorate and the president. The director of the Levada Centre Lev Gudkov (2015a) argued the first version of Putin’s social contract, running from 2000-2011, was based on the idea the people would stay out of politics and, in return, the state would provide economic prosperity and growth. This was particularly attractive to Russia’s emerging middle-class. In this context, the unexpected protests that occurred after the 2011-2012 elections of real diversity across a variety of regions (Ross 2015) caught both the authorities and the expert community by surprise, challenging the country’s existing *status quo* (Gel’man 2013).

The ensuing clampdown that followed these protests included a variety of measures reducing freedom of speech and opportunities for public assembly (March, Cheskin 2015: 266-67). Gudkov argues this led to redrafting of the social contract so that the state’s main partner was no longer the ‘creative’ middle classes but the ‘poor and state-dependent conservative groups in the provinces’ (Gudkov 2015a: 864). This version of the contract is even more paternalistic, involving state promises to, on the one hand, prop up the existing dilapidated systems of free healthcare, education, state pensions and state-dependent industries, and, on the other, to achieve Russia’s rebirth as great power by ‘standing up’ to the West.<sup>51</sup> As the Moscow Carnegie Centre’s Andrei Kolesnikov (2017: 1) put it, ‘as the old social contract could not be

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<sup>51</sup> Here there are interesting parallels with the Brezhnev-era Soviet social contract, which was also fundamentally redrawn after the fall of Khrushchev, reducing ideological utopian demands, creating new spaces for semi-legal individual activity in the shadow economy while guaranteeing basic living standards and retaining superpower status. In return, Soviet citizens gave their loyalty and forwent political participation or the right to protest.

sustained any longer, a new version was offered: the people trade “loyalty and non-involvement in politics” in return for “Crimea, the glory of being great power and a one-thousand year history” (2017:1). This brings us to the final vector of nation-building in the Putin period: foreign policy initiatives and geopolitical visions.

### *Foreign policy and geopolitics*

If Yeltsin publicly promoted the political values of ‘democratic statehood, civic consciousness and patriotism’, the Putin era witnessed a shift in focus towards the merit of ‘maintaining the state spread over a vast territory’ (Panov 2010: 91). This involves restoring Russia as a ‘great power’, something expressed in Russian as *derzhavnichestvo* or (greatpowerness) (Urnov 2014). The main change in foreign policy under Putin has been to move away from the ‘integrated European power’ goal of Yeltsin period to the ‘independent, Eurasian and rhetorically revisionist power it became by 2004-05’ (Newton 2010: 88). This was partially a response to American actions under neo-con president George W. Bush, who neglected to treat Russia as a serious partner in the ‘War on Terror’, expanded NATO, installed missile launch facilities in Eastern Europe and, perhaps worst of all, supported colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space (Trenin 2015: 76-91). Whatever they were a response to, Russia’s new assertive foreign policy have brought positive shifts in the public approval rates of the President, whose spikes in 2008 and 2014 coincide with Russian involvements in Georgia and Ukraine respectively. Foreign policy is arguably the centrepiece of Putin’s identity project today and taps into the memory of Russia’s historical greatness in the Russian population. For Lilia Shevtsova (2015: 25) ‘foreign policy has become the Swiss Army knife of the personalised-power system’s drive to preserve itself’ that can be used to ‘compensate for the Kremlin’s waning internal resources’ and ‘divert attention away from deep social and economic problems’.

Vyacheslav Morozov (2013, 2015) has argued that Russia’s assertive foreign policy has a dual nature. One part of this is neo-imperial and looks to assure Russian dominance of the post-Soviet space. This revolves around the apparent need to maintain control (or keep free of ‘anti-Russian’ influence) certain

zones designated as strategically vital; Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The other main component is Russia's struggle with the 'West', an American-led force that looks to obstruct Russia's attempts to achieve her legitimate goals. In this struggle Russia presents herself in an 'anti-imperial' mode advocating a 'multipolar world' that would 'democratize' international affairs, bringing about a liberation from American dominance. (Morozov 2013: 16). For Gudkov (2015b) this activates certain previously dormant components of Soviet identity, when the 'the feeling of belonging to an enormous country (...)' provided the "little man" with compensation for daily humiliation' in terms of 'chronic poverty' and 'lack of rights'. This anti-Western and negative mobilisation is 'preoccupied with the search for internal and external enemies' (Gudkov 2015b: 37-8).

Yet, Russia's stance to the West has more to it than this hard-nosed and confrontational style. Russia is also presented as a 'normal' modern and innovative country to visit for tourism and business. 'Mega-projects' such as Skolkovo, Sochi and the football World Cup are presented as evidence of this vector (Makarychev, Yatsk 2014). Both sides of this are projected in state media to shore up support for the country's current course. In examining media discourses on the 'West' in Russia, Joanna Szostek (2017) highlighted three main recurring themes: (i) the USA is hypocritical and wants to run the world (ii) Europe and Russia would get on better without US interference and that, after the current conflict is solved, they will return to 'normal' co-operation (iii) Russia and the other BRIC countries deserve more say in world affairs. The mass transmission of these themes on state media are part of a communications strategy on the part of the Russian leadership. The Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 underlined Russia's need to influence how the world perceives her and wage struggle to 'counteract information threats to (Russia's) sovereignty and security'.<sup>52</sup> These efforts to wage an information war with the West are part of a drive to have Russia recognised as a great power, and, from the point of view of the authorities, it is hoped that ordinary Russians will identify with such efforts.

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<sup>52</sup> [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186)



According to sociological polling, these policies have succeeded in uniting Russian society in particular phases.<sup>53</sup> Emil Pain (2016) has argued that an ‘imperial syndrome’ continues to dominate in Russia. Central to this is the obsession with keeping the ‘imperial body’ in one piece, which Pain traces back to a 2003 Putin speech where he outlined the challenge of ‘Maintaining a state spread over such a vast territory and preserving a unique community of peoples while keeping up a strong international presence’, which he saw as Russia’s thousand-year ‘historic fate’.<sup>54</sup> Obsession with retaining the ‘imperial body’ is combined with ‘imperial consciousness’, which Pain views as composed of two elements: Russian essentialism (the idea of a special Russian civilization) and viewing the West as the key existential threat to this civilization (Pain 2016: 60). Overall, Russia’s imperial syndrome works toward a conservative worldview that has strong parallels with Count Uvarov and the Slavophiles: Russia needs ‘a strong ruler, an emperor, as a defence against external enemies’ (ibid). Thus, the state’s use of foreign policy involves a potent mix of rebooted Soviet imagery, pre-revolutionary Slavophile intellectual traditions and modern language of international law and self-determination to offer a compelling geopolitical mission for Russia today.

### *Conclusion*

This review has highlighted a number of trends in post-Soviet nation-building. Firstly, the Putin period has abandoned much of the anti-Soviet rhetoric of the Yeltsin years, ending the ‘westerniser’ turn of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, responding to shifts in public opinion about the nature of Russia’s post-Soviet course. Secondly, while the construction of a common identity ‘from above’ has taken some time to take shape, the current *bricolage* is an interesting blend of pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet elements. This includes imperial imagery (consider the pomp and fanfare of the Presidential Address), claims to civilizational distinctiveness and the commitment to upholding traditional

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<sup>53</sup> The 2008 conflict with Georgia was the early litmus test of this new direction in foreign policy. FOM polls in the aftermath found 49% agreed with Putin’s new course, while 35% actually saw it as too soft (Lukin 2009: 84-85). The current war of nerves with Ukraine and annexation of Crimea to has also been met with resounding approval by the Russian masses; a recent VCIOM poll recorded 91% approval of actions in Crimea. See <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=114746>

<sup>54</sup> Putin, V. (2003), ‘Poslanie Federal’nomu Sobraniuu Rossiiskoi Federatsii’ [Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation], *Kremlin. ru*, 16 May, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21998> (last accessed 13 May 2015).

values. Thus, in some ways, Putin-era conservatism bears comparison with the official nationalism of the late nineteenth century. Together with this, Soviet elements continue to play a role, with Russians continuing in their ‘elder brother’ role under the new brand of a ‘state-forming’ people forging the peoples of Eurasia into a ‘unique civilization’. The rhetoric of conservative Soviet social policy is also reproduced in the current turn to neo-traditionalism. Post-Soviet elements also play a role, as state discourse employs language of the civic nation partially imported from the West, as well as using the discourse of self-determination and equality among nations to justify a more robust stance in foreign affairs.

Thirdly, it is important to note no clear state ideology has emerged to replace Soviet communism. As Lilia Shevtsova (2015: 25) concluded the current ‘array of legitimating concepts resembles a stew whose ingredients are simply whatever the chef could obtain: Sovietism, nationalism, imperialism, military patriotism, Russian Orthodox fundamentalism, and economic liberalism’. From this mixture, civilizational nationalism, social conservatism and neo-traditionalism are used most clearly in state narratives to elaborate on Russia’s distinct path. Fourthly, the most recent period has also witnessed an incomplete reboot of the Soviet social contract, the first version of which exchanged non-involvement in politics in return for material well-being and stability (Laruelle 2009: 25). This has now evolved into updated version that has replaced the promise of prosperity with minimum social welfare provision and a much heavier accent on great power politics.

Putin’s statist brand of national identity blends authoritarianism with democratic window dressing (*managed democracy*), Russian great-power imperial (*rossiyskii*) identity and a civic inclusive (*rossiyanin*) sense of Russianness. All of this is underpinned with commitment to maintaining a powerful and paternalistic state to hold the country together and provide social stability and solidarity (Brookfield 2012: 392). Finally, the centrality of foreign policy is clear, with the West playing a central role as the key constituent ‘Other’. The way the West has come to play this role is partially explained in the alienating actions of the USA and NATO. On the other hand, this can be understood as playing into Russia’s imperial consciousness: the anxieties of

holding together the world's largest state, the great importance attached to retaining great power status. The re-emergence of geopolitical tensions and new divisions, along with the persistence of imperial consciousness suggest Soviet and pre-Revolutionary legacies have been important in determining the shifting course of the post-Soviet story.

The four themes highlighted in this concluding section re-emerge in various parts of the four empirical chapters of this thesis, which offers a picture of how ordinary people have absorbed, internalised, reproduced, rejected or ignored various elements of post-Soviet nation-building. The shift to a Slavophile style is visible in viewing the West an enemy across Russian history (chapter four), Russia as a distinct civilization that has her own path (chapter six and seven). The sense of *bricolage* in identity is highlighted most of all in discussions on nationality, citizenship, ethnicity and interethnic relations (chapter five). The lack of a coherent ideology stands out in discussions on the political system and foreign policy goals (chapters six and seven). Finally, the persistence of 'imperial consciousness' and 'greatpowerness' are also salient in conceptualisations of the Russian 'we' (chapter five) and Russia's role in the world (chapter seven).

## Chapter Four

### **Popular Historical Memory ‘from below’: Themes of stability and conservatism, the salience of 1988-1998.**

#### **Introduction and theoretical considerations**

This chapter considers the role of popular historical memory in Russian national identity, revealing commonly shared visions of the national past. Collective memory undoubtedly can act as a powerful cohesive force, binding the disparate members of a nation together. It is another force demarcating the boundary between Us and Them, delineating the national self from the foreign, alien ‘Other’. Such binding memories can be passed from generation to generation, transmigrating across multiple historical contexts. Collective memory then, is about how the historical ‘we’ is constructed and defined in communities by ‘agreeing upon what they hold to be important, to which story they accord, which anxieties and values they share’ (Assmann, 2008: 52). As we saw in the previous chapter, state-led efforts towards the construction of a ‘useable past’ for the national community are not without contradictions and ambiguity. In uncovering some of the shared ideas, values and interpretations located in collectively remembered versions of the past, we see how state policies ‘from above’ are accepted, rejected, transformed and subverted.

Below I examine the myths and historical *longue durée* view of history that form an important component in Russia’s hegemonic nationalist discourse. Furthermore, I consider the important role played by lived experience and transmitted memory of the period 1988-1998. The chapter also dispels the notion that historic memory in Russia is dominated by nostalgia for the Soviet Union across the board. In fact, the absorption of the ‘Soviet’ into a ‘useable past’ is complicated by an important split in normative standards across the population. Before we examine these points, I will preface these findings with some important theoretical considerations in the study of historical memory.

The starting point in terms of theory can be found in the pioneering work of Maurice Halbwachs, who coined the term ‘collective memory’ and claimed ‘no memory is possible outside the frameworks used by people living in society to

determine and retrieve their recollections.’ (Halbwachs 1992: 43). Memory is a cultural inheritance very much influenced by social networks; it is up to the social group to decide what is remembered and forgotten from history and this is achieved, in part at least, through discussions in families and communities. Thus, Halbwachs makes a key contribution in linking collective memory to social groups. A central concept in this chapter is that interactions between families, peer groups and generational cohorts affect the (re)production and transmission of historical memory. Representations of the past can only be deemed credible if they are congruent with the dominant thoughts, values and feelings of the group in question.

Beyond social frames, another important theoretical consideration is the question of generation. The sampling of respondents covered two age groups, the last Soviet youth generation (40-55) and current post-Soviet youth (18-30). Generational positions can be examined along the lines of a common ‘age cohort’ (people of a similar age) and generational ‘lineage’ (the transmission of memory from older to younger) (DeMartini 1985). It is important not to treat generations as natural units that always exist. It is more useful to think of them as ‘produced through common experience and through discourse.’ (Yurchak 2006: 30). This chapter also draws out some of the key moments where age cohort differences are significant and instances of lineage transmission in collective memory. What is of key interest here is to identify those ‘myths’ that, although significant, are confined within certain generational, social and cultural pockets, and those with the ability to transcend these barriers and become more acceptable to the wider population.

In connecting a ‘suitable past’ with a ‘believable future’ (Misztal 2003:17), the remembering of a desirable past often involves locating a ‘golden age’ or ‘heroic past’; those periods when the country was in more desirable circumstances. At the same time, there are certain ‘disastrous’ periods that stand out as ‘how not to life’. As Mark Jubulis (2007: 173) pointed out, this focus on the golden age or the trauma is not about a return to the past; it is about supporting agendas in the present, be it economic modernization or more assertive foreign policy. In this sense, the nation seeks out its desirable shared

future destiny by locating and remembering its desirable past – the ‘golden age’ and the ‘heroic past.’ As Barry Schwartz (2000: 251) put it, memory is ‘a cultural programme that orientates our intentions, sets our moods, and enables us to act.’ He argued that we ‘key’ the past, bringing memory into line with contemporary cultural values and standards, allowing models of the past to share one meaning space with the experience of the present (Schwartz 2000: 226). In this sense of ‘memory as cultural programme’, ‘normality’ plays a vital role. This chapter argues much of what is deemed ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ is strongly connected to the lived experience of the period 1988-1998.

In approaching the study of historical memory, the term ‘collective memory’ is not without its problems. Duncan Bell (2003) argued there is a danger we rely too much on the term ‘memory’; he warned against the totalizing connotations of ‘collective memory’; ‘the alleged unified, coherent memory shared amongst *all* of the people concerning *their* national past’ (Bell 2003: 74). Nets-Zehngut (2012: 254-255) proposed the division of ‘collective memory’ into five constituent components.<sup>55</sup> It is the fifth and final of these, the ‘popular’ collective memory, or, in other words, representations of the past that dominate in larger social groups, that is the focus of the chapter. Few would doubt the importance of the ‘popular,’ given that it acts as a restraint on the activities of ‘memory entrepreneurs,’ who in attempting to reshape visions of the past to their own goals are limited by ‘the constraints of historically developed, socially transmitted, and culturally framed credibility’ in popular historical memory (Bernhard and Kubik 2014: 9).

This brings us to the question of how to access popular collective memory. For a variety of reasons, many appear more than happy to rely on public opinion polling data, where a set of positions are mapped out in advance by researchers and respondents are expected to tick the boxes and provide a picture of how history is perceived. Without becoming embroiled in methodological debates too deeply here, the use of semi-structured interviews reveals how people explain and describe historical periods, exposing what is ‘remembered’ and

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<sup>55</sup> These include ‘the official’ (organized by various state bodies from textbooks in schools to museum exhibitions), ‘the autobiographical’ (events and experience as recorded in memoirs and oral history), ‘the historical’ (arranged by professional scholars and historians) and the ‘cultural’ (which emerges in films, TV, books, media, documentaries).

‘forgotten’ in longer descriptive sections or ‘thick descriptions’. It is important to underline that the scholar of popular collective memory approaches research in a rather different way to the professional historian: while the latter looks from the outside in with apparent objectivity and scrutiny in the service of ‘historical truth’, the former looks for access to the myths and representations that a group knows within itself. This is one reason why ethnographic fieldwork can produce important data on popular collective memory.

While examining the ‘thick descriptions’ of respondents, what became clear is saliency of myths in collective memory. In order to trace the most salient aspects of popular collective memory I take up Duncan Bell’s argument that ‘collective memory’ is at least partially made up of constructed, internalised and commonly reproduced ‘nationalist myths’, which he defines as a story that ‘simplifies, dramatizes and selectively narrates the story of a nation’s past and its place in the world ... through (re)constructing its past’ (Bell 2003: 74). Here ‘myth’ does not take on the meaning of ‘lie’ or ‘falsehood’; instead it can be viewed as a narrative that possesses an ‘emotional underpinning’ and is able to ‘add significance to the world’ (Bottici and Challand 2015: 90-92). In attempting to locate these myths on certain historical junctures we are looking for ‘an idea, an event, a person, a narrative that has acquired a symbolic value and is engraved and transmitted in memory’ (Assmann 2008: 67-68). This emphasises the point that, in order for the past to become ‘memory’ it must be articulated in social groups and passed on through creative interpretation. The myths examined here must be coherent and exciting enough to be deemed worthy of transmission in social settings.

Thus, in this chapter I examine certain ‘myths’ that are successfully reproduced in the ‘mythscape’ (Bell 2003) or the ‘mnemonic field’ (Bernhard, Kubik 2014: 17). This is an area where various myths on history battle it out for primacy. This leads us to also to view memory as a discursive practice – its ‘discursive materiality’ means we can uncover memory existing in different and competing ‘discursive formations’ (Foucault 1978: 15). Here we recognise the fluidity of collective memory and argue it is subject to change; shifts from established memory to counter-memory are expected in response to the changing conditions of the present. Counter-memory has the power to

overcome the established hegemony of political elites, thus we can also view the ‘mythscape’ as a ‘contested territory in which groups engaging in a political conflict promote competitive views of the past in order to gain control over the political centre.’ (Zerubavel 1997: 11).

One example of how myth can set agendas in the present can be found in the work of Jelena Subotić on Croatian and Serbian hegemonic narratives that both focus on ‘broadly shared feelings of victimhood, even martyrdom, and injustice at the hands of more powerful states, and a desire for the vindication of past wrongs’ (Subotić 2013: 325). In examining myths in circulation in post-Soviet Russia, Alex Oushakine linked these narratives to the pain experienced in economic transformation of country and showed how ‘the inability to convincingly explain individual or collective losses’ led to the ‘intensive production of popular conspiracy narratives aimed to bring light to hidden forces and concealed plans of “evil outsiders”’ (Oushakine 2009: 74). Here myths with conspiracy themes reveal the ‘real’ origins of unfair situations today and offer way to overcome unpleasant things in the present. Thus, ‘the mutual recollection of the country’s negative past was often used to shape new forms of solidarity and belonging’ (Oushakine 2009: 109). In this chapter, we also examine how myths can often be conspiratorial in style and operate as a ‘populist theory of power’ (Fenster 2008: 84–90). Having examined some important theoretical considerations, I now turn to the empirical findings of this chapter.

### **Findings on historical memory**

The findings of this chapter are divided into three main sections. The first will explore how the dominant ‘golden ages’ reflect deep-seated longings for stability and order, while negative periods generally involved violent revolution and/or state disintegration. Interestingly, despite high-profile state-led efforts, very few respondents referred to the Great Patriotic War. Instead, an idealised version of pre-revolutionary period (1900-1917) took centre stage, alongside positive views of the ‘Putin era’. In examining the most common images of a ‘desirable past’, I will also refer to normality and abnormality in these myths, showing how the past is remoulded to be congruent with the



experience of both the very recent past and present. Furthermore, a popular *longue durée* view of Russian history among certain respondents will be unpacked and examined, revealing a vision of Russia experiencing positive phases of stability followed by disastrous downward spirals, with the West often playing the role of the dangerous external force seeking to gain from this.

In the second section, attention will be paid to how lived experience and transmitted memory of Russia's recent past (1988-1998) influence the above myths and *longue durée* view of Russian history. This will involve an exploration of how older respondents related their own lived experience of 1988-1998 and where younger respondents reproduced this. I will outline the way memory of this period shapes political values in the present, especially in the rejection of previous 'liberal' myths on the end of the USSR as a 'triumph of democracy', encouraging a general conservatism in the population.

The final section will examine the role of Soviet periods in popular memory, revealing how strongly contested positive and negative myths about certain Soviet period appeal to different sections of the population. This section will reveal the importance of social frames in reproducing the Soviet past is the role of social frames. I will explore how pro-Soviet positions tend to be within a certain age and background. On the other hand, while anti-Soviet myths are more likely to cross such social lines. In examining myths that defend Stalinist and Brezhnev era development policies, what becomes clear is that praise for the 'Soviet' is veiled or open criticism of the deficiencies of the economic and social policies of the current period. The section will also examine powerful anti-Soviet myths that act as a break on the incorporation of these elements of the Soviet past into Russia's 'useable past'.

## **Part one: The myths of stability and myths of national tragedy**

### *The pre-revolutionary decades as a 'golden age'*

It is surprising that period leading up to the First World War (1900-1914), and the Putin era (2000-2014), both of which fall outside of the Soviet Union's seventy year history, were most often selected as the 'best periods' in Russia's modern history. After all, state historical memory policy has expended far

more effort on commemorating the Great Patriotic War period and we have yet to witness any significant shift in how to commemorate the end of the Tsarist monarchy or the October Revolution of 1917.<sup>56</sup> Given that respondents of various ages, location, gender and social background reproduced myths on 1900-1914 and 1917, the period has strong potential for incorporation into Russia's 'useable past'. The way positive representations of the 1900-1914 period were framed was striking; respondents were consistent in describing Russia as being 'on the up', enjoying a positive and healthy trajectory. The myth of 1900-1914 tells us much about what Russia's 'normal' condition should be: a country well on the road to entering fully-fledged modernity, as one of the Great Powers of Europe. This fits with the picture of quantitative surveys, which have also shown positive identification with this period.<sup>57</sup> There were a number of features in presenting this period as a desirable past for Russia. Firstly, Russia is remembered as a strong country that is respected and admired by other European countries, one that possessed a dynamic and attractive economy with a powerful Rouble. Russia was then a magnet for talented people rather than, as is the case today, a country suffering from 'brain drain':

*Pre-revolutionary Russia was a very strong country. We had a Rouble that was then a convertible currency. We lived better than Europe. I mean Europe came to us: doctor, tutors to work in Russian families. (...) but now we see the opposite picture, when people are looking for ways to leave here.*

Natalya (50) Accountant. NN

Part of the idea of a developing and dynamic Russia revolved around understandings of Stolypin's agricultural reforms that made 'agricultural production more flexible, making the peasants modernize and produce more'. Alongside this 'the Rouble was placed on the gold standard, making it one of the most important and dependable currencies in the world' (Viktor (22) International Relations Student, NN). According to this myth, the Russia of 1900-1914 was 'not a wild or ignorant (*dikoy ili dremuchey*) country' but one that 'was developing

<sup>56</sup> Census polling reveals a mixed picture; as many as 51% view Lenin's role in Russian history positively, and only 14% would support the removal of his statues. <https://www.levada.ru/2017/04/19/vladimir-lenin/>

<sup>57</sup> A 2016 Levada Center poll showed 30% viewed the pre-revolutionary period of Nicholas II positively as opposed to only 19% viewing it negatively: <https://www.levada.ru/2016/03/01/praviteli-v-otechestvennoj-istorii/>. A 2011 study also showed the popularity of 1900-1914 across two generational groups (18-30 age cohort 83%, 31-50 age cohort 82%) (Gorshkov et al 2011: 76).

*successfully*' (Elisa (58) Director of Sports Centre, SPB). Furthermore, Russia's place in the world was promising: she *'exported grain to the whole world, industry was developing (...) Prospects were pretty good'*. (Vyacheslav (53) Head of corporate security, SPB). This is a picture of gradual, steady economic growth bringing growing prosperity; the country was *'on the ascendancy (vzlet)'*, *'with everything on the up (vse shlo vverkh)* (Mikhail (29) Actor, Moscow) and on the road to becoming a *'normal' or 'strong' European power.*

What is interesting about these descriptions of 1900-1914 is how they resonate with the other period chosen by a large number of respondents as a successful phase in Russia's development: 2000-2014. This is a tendency also recorded in very recent Levada Centre surveys.<sup>58</sup> While this can hardly be considered a *'historical period'*, respondents were given the freedom to pick any era between today and 1900, and, as this was their preference, the results should not be disregarded. In this context, we find the qualities of the Stolypin and the Putin eras being presented in similar terms, independently.<sup>59</sup> What both representations have in common is a focus on steady economic improvement and gradual evolution towards the level of *'normal'* countries. Overall, the 2000-2014 period is described as one where the course has been set in an understandable manner in general terms, producing visible dividends across several key indicators. Many respondents highlighted this period as one of upward trajectory, particularly in the first decade of Putin's tenure, a period *'when the people of Russia had never lived better, I mean for the our whole of history, (...) whatever they say about it elsewhere (...) it was a new level of consumerism (...) Russia has never eaten so well.* (Konstantin (27) state municipal management specialist, Moscow).

Thus, central to choosing this period is the feeling of increased prosperity, stability and security and economic growth, which brought visibly improved living standards. One respondent highlighted some key commonalities between 1900-1914 and 2000-2014 as both are *'most auspicious periods'* in Russian

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<sup>58</sup> Levada polling for 1993-94 on Russia's best historical period show around 20% selecting the 1900-1914 period, which came in second only to the Brezhnev era (40%). When a new poll was launched in 2017 it added a new (ahistorical) category *'the Putin era'*. This shot to first place (32%) and pulled support away from the other two popular periods, which now scored lower (6% and 29% respectively). As the scores are not broken down into age groups it makes it hard to analyse these dynamics along the age cohorts studied in this research. <http://www.levada.ru/2017/02/14/fevralskaya-revolutsiya-1917/>

<sup>59</sup> Only a handful of respondents explicitly connected the two periods. However, the content of the descriptions, when placed alongside one another, does strongly resonate.

history were that in both cases *‘Russia in one way or another took a jump forward and started to rise to the same level of other European countries (...) (this was about) a leap forward (skachok), progress, a strong ruler’* (Anastasia (21) Economics Student, NN). Putin era stability is contrasted to the era of ruin that *preceded* it (the wild nineties), while the 1900-1914 period is compared to what *followed* it; the October revolution and civil war:

*Firstly, before the First World War we had a good period, the country was on the rise (na pod"yeme) and if it hadn't been for that disaster (beda) (October 1917 M.B) (...) It's possible that everything could have turned out differently for us. The second, is the current period. Even if there are still some things lacking, some of our places are still in ruins, at least we have a direction and we are starting to develop again.*

Ludmilla (50) Head of University Dormitory, NN

Thus, memories of a peaceful and stable phases - 1900-1914 and 2000-2014 – both tell us much about how many view Russia's desirable future: one of continued economic development, improved living standards, stability and predictability. Here, a clear dynamic emerges linking the past (1900-1914), the present (2000-2014); the desirable past is connected to the perceived social reality of ordinary people and reflect agendas for the future.

### *The Myth of 1917 as rupture and catastrophe*

If we move away from ‘golden era’ and consider Russia's ‘worst period’, we find the period of the October revolution and the foundation of the USSR (1917-1923) was chosen by an outright majority of respondents. This is largely in line with quantitative survey results in Russia, which show a large majority viewing the period in negative terms.<sup>60</sup> Seen as a dark period that shattered Russia's progress in social, political, cultural and economic development; the sense of ‘rupture’ from a pathway to ‘normality’ was a clear theme. The

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<sup>60</sup> A 2016 Levada poll found the October Revolution and the period following it is viewed negatively by 48%, with only 19% holding a positive view - <https://www.levada.ru/2016/03/01/praviteli-v-otechestvennoj-istorii/>. A Russian Academy of Science study in 2011 found 62% of the 18-30 age cohort and 55% of the 31-50 age cohort selected it as a negative period (Gorshkov et al 2011: 78). These results should not be confused with polling on ‘the role of the October Revolution in Russian history’, which has been steadily divided over the years (it currently stands at 48% positive and 31% negative: <https://www.levada.ru/2017/04/05/oktyabrskaya-revolutsiya-2/>). The difference may be that in the first case respondents are considering a period (October 1917 until NEP), where as in the second they reflect on the Revolution's longer legacy across history, which is a far more complex question.

October Revolution was *'the biggest evil because it if wasn't for this we would have just had our normal February revolution and we would have developed like all normal European countries. We would have taken that path because we were on it already.'* (Julia (47) Assistant in film set production, SPB). This 'dark' and 'abnormal' age for Russia was described in rich and diverse ways, suggesting the powerful potential it has accumulated in popular collective memory.

Representations of the 'disaster' focused on three interlinking lines, (i) as a human tragedy (ii) as a catastrophe for the Russian nation (iii) as a geopolitical disaster for the Russian state (and a relief to our rivals). In the first case, respondents paid attention to the human cost of the revolution, the sense of horrendous bloodletting in an orgy of destruction and violence. One event that was commonly referred to was the brutal execution of the royal family, an act that typified the blind, ruthless violence of the era and the sense of wilful, cruel and inhumane destruction being inherent to the revolution's progression:

*As a humanist, just how they (the Bolsheviks) behaved with the family of the Tsar, I think that was unjust and simply inhuman. It was awful and it summed up the nature of the new authorities. Also for the people it was supposed to give them an idea of what these new rulers were really made of.*

Marina (25) Language teacher, NN

In the second case, we find the tragic human losses are considered more on the level of the nation as a whole. This includes, for example, not only individual tragedies but collective loss, such as cultural destruction wrought by the Bolsheviks on *'lifestyles, a feel for language, and the ability to sing our Russian songs (...)* Every people has the experience of previous generations, the 'collective subconscious'. And, sadly, what we had built up, we lost here' (Mikhail (29) Actor, Moscow). This imagines October 1917 as an assault on Russia as a 'nation': her culture, intelligentsia, religion, and traditions. One common idea was that the October Revolution started a process that wiped out some of the best minds in Russia at the time. This line of thinking emphasises the tragedy in terms of the 'Russian nation' rather than the torments of individual victims. The focus is on the long term consequences for the Russian people as *'a large part of thinking people, like engineers, the educated, doctors, writers, qualified*

*specialists, either left or were exterminated after the revolution (...) they could have made a contribution in the development of the country. Instead they were removed'* (Ruslan (57) Programmer, SPB). The sense that Bolshevism acted as a motor of 'unnatural selection' that 'led to moral and mental degeneration', was a favourite theme of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1995: 81) in his later political writings.<sup>61</sup> It appears some of this message has found a home in popular collective memory today.

An interesting term that cropped up in several respondents, especially in the SPB respondents was the idea that 'the cream of the nation' (*ves' tsvet natsii*) was exterminated during this era of catastrophe.<sup>62</sup> What is emerging here is some idea of what the Russian nation is, an imagined entity of different people united along national lines that is torn apart in 1917. This sense of national disaster focuses on the senseless destruction of civil war as:

*The most terrible thing that can happen to a country, when your brother becomes your enemy. An enormous number of people died. Those who didn't die, left and this was an awful loss for Russia. The best of the nation (ves' tsvet natsii) was either killed or, having survived, left the country (...) All that was left behind were the drunken sailors that had carried out the revolution (laughs).*

Alexei (25) Assistant to deputy of Local Assembly, SPB

The 'disaster of 1917' was often described in the most the most emotive terms, and is an excellent example of how myth operates in popular collective memory. Firstly, the period in question (the Revolution and Civil War) is simplified and painted in terms of 'trauma' – a tragedy in terms of what it did to the Russian people. Secondly, meaning is injected into the narrative through emotion. Here the emotion is great lament, the feeling of victimhood. In using the term 'we', the trauma is imagined to have hurt the Russian nation that, in the case below, is comprised of the royal family, the Church, classes of people. All of the latter are imagined to be victims; the essence of the tragedy is the

<sup>61</sup> Solzhenitsyn (1995: 81) wrote 'the physical extermination of people was vital (...) Through this unnatural selection (противоотбор) of the population the most valuable people in moral and intellectual terms were cut out'.

<sup>62</sup> This discourse was already well-developed in the late eighties. The phrase '*cvet natsii*' can be found as early as 1992 in the words of Social Democratic politician Boris Orlov who, in an interview, railed against the role of the Bolshevik party in Russia's history. <http://www.yeltsincenter.ru/digest/release/den-za-dnem-7-fevralya-1992-goda>.

damage done to the fabric of this ‘nation’:

*The worst was October 1917. We Russian people, desecrated everything sacred that we had (...) we shot our royal family, a house that had served the state for centuries with faith and truth (veroi i pravdoi) (...) we started totally destroying our own religion, wrecking our churches and killing our priests. We killed entire classes of people! The whole best of our nation (ves' tsvet natsii) was killed or left the country. It was like a knockout blow that nobody can get up from.*

Alexander (25) Business development manager, SPB

Facing up to this disaster means coming to terms with collective failure. This myth suggests that Russia's twentieth century was built on ‘abnormal’ foundations and, as we will see below, dovetails with the tendency to view the Stalinist period as another ‘tragedy for the Russian people’. Much of this ties in with what was once a ‘counter-memory’ position at the end of the 1980's: the idea that, had Russia avoided this Bolshevik ‘disaster’, would have continued on a path of modernization and remained one of the ‘civilized nations’.<sup>63</sup> Thus, it can be argued a shift has occurred in the mythscape of Russia that has involved absorption and reproduction of more anti-Bolshevik interpretations of Russian history ‘from below’.

In this research, however, few respondents articulated an anti-Bolshevik long view of Russian history. Instead, a different *longue durée* was found to be in circulation, which I return to in more detail below, that focuses on Russian history as a series of upward and downward shifts. This also is connected to the third trend in viewing 1917 as a ‘disaster’: the view that the revolution was a geopolitical catastrophe for the Russian state, wiping out years of successful Romanov statecraft. Sociological polling suggests this line of thinking has retained a stable share of popular thinking on 1917, with around a quarter of respondents viewing the collapse of the monarchy as ‘leading to a loss of national and state greatness’.<sup>64</sup> This line of thinking views Russia's trials and tribulations through the prism of competition with external powers and often

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<sup>63</sup> This myth of the Stolypin era may find parts of its origins in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's three volume ‘The Red Wheel’ – 1990, followed in 1992 film ‘The Russia we lost’ by Sergei Govorukhin

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.levada.ru/2017/02/14/fevral'skaya-revolutsiya-1917/>

interprets October 1917 as a 'great betrayal' linked to 'Western intrigues'. Here the revolutionaries are seen as traitors to Russia; by forcing her out of the war the country lost her rightful place at the table of victors:

*I consider the collapse of the Russian Empire to be an act of treason. I mean (pause) imagine it, while the war is raging a person arrives, Lenin from Germany, who passed in train through the country, he arrives and brings down. I mean the socialists brought down our army and, in the end, Russia leaves a war she could have won.*

Viktor (22) International Relations Student, NN.

This brings us to one possible 'lessons' of 1917: that Russia '*didn't have enough smart people in the state, those who could have done something and taken control of these processes, applying some political will and a certain amount of harshness (zhestskost')* in order to bring the situation under control' (Igor, (41) Lecturer in International Relations, NN). Thus, the weakness caused by this indecisive leadership, combined with the arrival of various treacherous and terroristic revolutionaries, allowed internal upheaval and disorder to cause treachery and the defeat of Russia's interests. Sociological polling comparing mass views to the revolution between 1990 and 2017 shows an increased number view the loss of the Autocracy as a 'great loss' and explain the revolution as a result of 'weak central government' (from 36% to 45%) and 'a conspiracy against the Russian people' (from 6% to 20%).<sup>65</sup> This links into a *longue durée* view of Russian history that reveals anxieties about the present: lingering fears that the precarious progress being made by Russia under Putin could be undone by internal upheavals.

### *The popular longue durée view of history*

It would appear that life experience and transmission of memories of the very recent past (1988-1998) are vital in crafting a *longue durée* narrative that views Russian history as led by cycles of stability and collapse over the centuries. This portrays Russian history as a struggle between two extreme states: stable, ordered periods characterized by strong central rule and phases of disorder, chaos, internal upheaval, often referred to in Russian as *smuta*. Respondents

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<sup>65</sup> <https://www.levada.ru/2017/04/05/oktyabrskaya-revolutsiya-2/>



offered the pre-war era (1900-1914) and the Brezhnev era (*zastoi*) (1964-1982) as classic stable phases, while contrasting them with the October Revolution and Civil War (1917-1923) and the perestroika/market reforms of the nineties (1989- 1999). This cycle is graphically illustrated in the following way: *History goes in like a spiral in Russia, people never learn. We always have to end up with the shit hitting the fan (v polnoy zhope) and then, only then, do things pick up. Our country doesn't know how to develop in a gradual way* (Zakhar (29) Manager in export company, SPB). The acceptance of this cyclical long-view interpretation of Russian history is linked to three very important 'lessons from history' that help support current values and ideas. The first of these equates 'revolution' with any rash and overly hasty policies or sudden social and political change. According to his view, *'the path of revolution is totally unacceptable'*, political change *'shouldn't be done through the great leaps and killing (skakaniya i gibeli) of people'*. Furthermore, revolutions are seen to be led by *'a handful of people'* who *'stupefy'* the masses. Finally, the masses themselves *'just stupidly follow'* these leaders even though they *'don't really get the point'* and are ultimately all this *'talking'* ends with *'few results'* except that the people *'suffer'* in the end (Ludmilla (50) Head of University Dormitory, NN).

It is likely that lived experience of the changes that followed 1988-1998 are influential here; the various reform promises of 'democracy' and 'liberalization' were felt to end with chaos, collapse and despair. The lived experience of the nineties may well be crucial in building a narrative according to which Russians have 'been through enough'. Below, Russia's twentieth century traumas explain the desire for 'peace' and 'quiet'. This viewpoint presents Russia as a country lurching from one radical set of events to the next with barely any respite between. This represents a kind of yearning for the kind of 'normality' respondents described with regards 1900-1914 and 2000-2014 – that of stability, order and peace:

*They accuse us Russians of some kind of passivity. Like we aren't capable of decisive action. But we Russians are tired of war, revolution. For the last one hundred years, through the civil war, revolution, then the Stalinist repressions, the war with fascism, where many millions of people lost their lives, every family had deaths. Then there was Afghanistan; I had*

*classmates fighting there. And remember the zinc-lined coffins that came back from there. We are tired of all this, just let us have a peaceful life. I don't want lots of impulsive actions (aktivnykh deystviy). Let the politicians agree among themselves somehow, we just don't want any demonstrations, we've had enough. We don't want any wars.*

Natalya (50) Accountant. NN

This kind of sentiment above shows how life experience (Afghanistan and political demonstrations) ties in with understanding of history to create values in the present.<sup>66</sup> This idea was condensed down into a more transmittable form and was a common position for respondents young and old. The essence of this mass common-sense position is that *'you shouldn't try to change life through revolution'* as this will *'destabilise life completely'*. Thus, reform *'needs to be done gradually, not to destroy and then build from nothing'* (Katya (22) Student Politics, NN).

A logical extension of this is the second key lesson: Russia only prospers when she has a 'strong leader' at the helm. This connects 'strong leaders' with 'stability' and 'weak leaders' with 'chaos'. Thus, one consequence of this *longue durée* view of Russian history, is support for political leaderships that are 'powerful', 'decisive' and 'tough': a point that chimes well with the image projected by the current President:

*Russia only starts to get back on her feet (podnimat'sya) and start living more or less well when she has a powerful leader (moshchnyy lider). Take Gorbachev, he was neither here nor there and the country fell apart. (...) But take Stalin, Putin, Lenin... well, let's just say the Russian people on a genetic level behave themselves well only when they are under the leadership of a tough Tsar (zhostkogo tsarya). If the Tsar is not tough a collapse will happen.*

Anton (52) ex-officer, small business owner, SPB

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<sup>66</sup> It is also a sentiment that can be traced as far back as 1992, when the leader of the communist party Gennady Zyuganov announced Russia had "reached its limit for revolutions". <http://tr.rkrp-rpk.ru/get.php?2076>

This brings us to the third important element of this *longue durée*: the idea that the West was and is central to explaining Russia's troubles, then and now. This ties in with research showing the 'West' has played a vital role as a constituent 'Other' in the historical development of Russian identity (Greenfeld 1992; Tolz 2001). In explaining the 1917 disaster with reference to the role of the 'West', a more conspiratorial, anti-Western myth emerges. A selection of respondents, mostly male and aged over forty, viewed the 1917 revolution as a conspiracy fostered abroad in Western Europe and unleashed on Russia when she was at her most vulnerable. These respondents view revolution as a weapon employed to weaken states in time of conflict and connect 1917, something external powers were seen to deploy in 1991 and the Time of the Troubles. Thus, themes of conspiracy abounded in this demographic group, who had experienced the 1991 collapse, which was also '*arranged from without*' while '*certain forces inside the country that facilitated this*'. Afterwards, however, ordinary people '*did not benefit from the collapse of the USSR*' (Vitaly (42) **Businessman, semi-retired. NN**).

Living through this experience (1988-1998) was increasingly disempowering as time passed; empirical research has supported the idea that conspiratorial themes were adopted in Russian society to help make sense of this increasingly challenging environment (Oushakine 2009). There were numerous examples of how it was only retrospectively that these respondents came to use conspiracy themes to explain the changes they experienced. While one could be '*pretty relaxed*' about the collapse at the time, now '*but now some time has passed, many things have come to light. We now know that Gorbachev betrayed the country, they are right to be talking about criminal charges for him.*<sup>67</sup> (...) *this was all done deliberately, he got a lot of money for this*' (Nikolay (52), **ex-policeman, retired, SPB**).

What is interesting is how some of the ideas of the 'male over-forty' segment seeped into a significant minority of younger respondents who subscribed to a

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<sup>67</sup> As part of the legislative efforts to declare bodies receiving income from abroad 'Foreign Agents', the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation submitted a motion to declare the Gorbachev Fund a 'foreign agent.' <http://rusplt.ru/society/obschestvennaya---palata---prosit---priznat---fond---gorbacheva---inostrannyim---agentom--17344.html> Following this the Civic Forum made an official request to the State Prosecutor Office to declare Gorbachev and Yeltsin guilty of state treason on the basis of telegrams sent to Washington in 1991. <http://rusplt.ru/society/gorbacheva-ofitsialno-zapodozrili-v-gosizmene--20321.html>

particular version of the *longue durée* view of Russian history. Russia's upward and downward trajectories over the centuries are tied to the interventions and subversive acts of the Western powers who, concerned by Russia's potential might, conspire to place obstacles in her path and, when possible, bring about her downfall:

*They say the USSR was brought down on purpose in order to destroy stability in Russia. They say Russia is a potentially very strong power (...). We have great potential. The fact is that revolutions and crises have destroyed Russia periodically at precisely the times she was about to get on her own two feet... only to then force her back into obscene positions... all so that she won't get too powerful(...) We all know the world is run by people from the West.*

**Daria (28) Events Manager for Local Government, SPB**

This idea of the perfidious West that still seeks to bring down Russia and reduce her into humiliating subordination cannot be presented as a fringe phenomenon; in chapter seven's discussions about Russia's role in the world we find plentiful examples of the USA being presented as an acquisitive superpower using revolutions to control the world, subvert states and break up countries with desirable resources into controllable chunks. The West's blame is not limited to 1917 revolution; the recent past is also referred to: *'the Gorbachev money, payments to the Ukrainians (during Maidan MB), all of this is from our beloved America, she is the one who needs the destabilization of Russia'* (Elisa (58) Director of Sports Centre, SPB). According to this view, Russia has been subject to constant probing by external powers searching for opportunity in Russia's internal upheaval. This goes all the way back to the Time of the Troubles and links various foreign powers with a common aim: to break up their large and powerful geopolitical opponent, Russia.

*If we look at history, we can see that Russia can only be destroyed from within. The external enemy, whether it is Napoleon, Hitler, the Poles (pause) they all tried to destroy the country but it didn't happen for them. But when the civil war started, we know things moved in another direction. When the USSR was brought down from within, how did that play out? We*

*know the answer. But on its own, the external enemy cannot take our country on.*

Zakhar (29) Manager in export company, SPB

It is worth pointing out here that this conspiratorial way of understanding history and world affairs is contested. Some younger respondents commented on the popularity of conspiracy in certain older age groups. One respondent highlighted how the during changes of 1991 *‘Russian society was blowing hot and cold, lots of different ideas hung in the air (...) with new freedoms people started to freak out (ofigivat’), now you could think and talk about so much, it was a shock for them.’* Given the extent of the change and the lack of understanding, many came to feel they *‘had let everything slip out of our hands, that a gang of conspirators had destroyed everything without asking anyone’* (Mikhail (24), IT support, SPB). Another younger respondent used the example of his own father, who *‘had lived in such a comfortable world and now, suddenly, was faced with all these things happening. It was from all this that the feeling emerged that there are enemies in our midst. And it is these enemies that want to hurt us and destroy the country’* (Arkady (27) Computer Programmer, NN). This suggests this conspiratorial way of seeing the world is, in some ways, viewed as the ‘baggage’ of an older generation. Although further research is needed, it is possible that this *longue durée* is rooted in the last Soviet generation (or the ‘Children of Reform’) and, with time, will become less salient.

On the other hand, the *longue durée* view of Russian history appears to be transmitted across generational lines, although more work is needed to reveal how far this is connected to social background, occupation, gender or education. It combines fear of rapid social and political change, support for ‘strong leaders’ and antipathy to the West to form a significant part of Russian identity today. As we will see in more detail in chapter six, these ‘lessons of history’ support a certain conservatism that has an important role in supporting the *status quo* in Russia today. It also ties in well with chapter seven’s discussion of how Russia’s role in the world is imagined. In a recent televised debate with opposition politician Alexey Navalny, Igor Strelkov, an ex-commander of pro-Russian forces in the Donbass, gave a public recital of how

the West is has been responsible for Russia's problems since 1991, including ruining the Soviet economy, installing an oligarchic system and turning the country into a resource colony.<sup>68</sup> In doing this he clearly taps into pre-existing anti-Western sentiment 'from below' that is reinforced by the myths of popular historical memory. I would argue that part of this pre-existing sentiment is shaped by Russia's recent past, which has witnessed great reform promises of democratization and liberalization, unexpected state disintegration and widespread social and economic dislocation. It is the lived memory of this, which is convincingly transmitted to younger respondents, that helps explain popular receptivity to myths around 1900-1914 and 1917, as well as the above *longue durée* view. Below, we will examine how interpretations of the recent past form part of are a 'historically developed, socially transmitted, and culturally framed credibility' (Bernhard, Kubik 2014: 9). This 'credibility' functions as a constraint on those seeking to offer new versions of the past. It can be argued that the most credible and consensual myths in Russia owe their success to their congruence with existing cultural repertoires influenced by the recent past (1988-1998).

## **Part two: The influence of recent and lived history: 1988-1998 Perestroika, the Collapse of 1991 and the Wild Nineties**

While there was much division on how to interpret 1991 and the question of how desirable the late Soviet system was, there was far more consensus among respondents on how to understand the complex and interlinked phases of perestroika (1985-1991), the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of a new country (1991-1998). Here a workable myth is on display that merges these two periods into one; the rapidly deteriorating conditions of 1985-1991 join the 1991-1998 market reforms to make one massive downward spiral. One possible reason for this is actual lived experience of reform resulting in things nobody had asked for or expected. As Timothy McDaniel (1996:155) aptly remarked:

*All of the promises made by the reformers to the public were turning into their opposite: instead of consensus around a new vision of socialism,*

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<sup>68</sup> Start from 28 minutes [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjbQdbJUibc&utm\\_source=oDR+Weekly&utm\\_campaign=5b49d02b43-oDRWeekly\\_eng\\_RSS\\_EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_0c4098fa37-5b49d02b43-407828021](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjbQdbJUibc&utm_source=oDR+Weekly&utm_campaign=5b49d02b43-oDRWeekly_eng_RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_0c4098fa37-5b49d02b43-407828021)

*irresolvable conflict; instead of a revitalization of the economy, declining growth, growing deficits and increased corruption; instead of moral renewal, a sense of apathy, powerlessness, and hopelessness among the masses.*

As reform proceeded and freedom increased, living standards started to drop, hardly a good association. In the narratives of personal experience of these periods from older respondents there is a powerful sense of families being disconnected from the reform process. As will be seen in chapter six, the experience of this period is influential in explaining aspects of political behaviour today.

This merging of the two reform periods into one allows people to mark it off as a phase in which Russia experienced a clear downward trajectory. This entails ‘forgetting’ other aspects of the reform era, such as the *neformaly*, business co-operatives or democratization, and ‘remembering’ the period of 1985 to 1991 and 1991-1999 with reference to words such as ‘collapse’ (*razval*), ‘stupidity’ and ‘rashness’. This is combined with the idea that the USSR could have limited itself to gradual economic reform, while postponing democratization indefinitely. Levada Centre polling shows that, over the last twenty years, the majority view the collapse as regrettable and avoidable.<sup>69</sup> Older respondents (who had lived through it as young adults) often described the reforms in general in negative terms: ‘it led to nothing good’, ‘it wasn’t anything to do with us’, ‘we didn’t support it or oppose it’ and ‘we went on trying to live, work, plan futures’. For many respondents, one way to make sense of the period is to argue that Russia should have followed the Chinese experience of reform, which as more conservative and economically successful, is more desirable. The essence of this myth is that had Russia ‘followed the Chinese path’ collapse could have been avoided (Roman (28) Journalist Kommersant, Moscow). Instead of ‘*giving permission for everything all at once*’, the leadership should have ‘*introduced things gradually*’ (Denis (41) Journalist, NN).

A central theme in criticizing the reforms from 1988-1998 was that too much

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<sup>69</sup> The number regretting the collapse peaked at 75% in 2000, declining to 49% in 2012. It is currently at 56%. Figures for viewing the collapse as ‘avoidable’ (50-60%) and ‘inevitable’ (25-30%) have been rather stable in this period. It is clear a consistent and solid one third do not view the collapse in negative terms. <https://www.levada.ru/2016/12/05/raspad-sssr-prichiny-i-nostalgia/>

was done too soon: *'you can't just give people permission for everything in one instant. Things should have been unrolled carefully and bit-by-bit. If it had been done that way then everything would have gone more smoothly and peacefully'* (Anton (52) ex-officer, small business owner, SPB). The idea of 'too much too soon' was also told in metaphors of home repair: *'Perestroika should have been like repairing a house not a demolition job. Gorbachev took perestroika so far to the point that he was ready to burn the house down just to get rid of a few cockroaches'* (Leonid (45) Religious history lecturer, NN). In other words, the reformers are compared to workers set to do home repair work who, instead of this, proceeded to *'start ripping things apart (...) destroying everything that is old'* (Anatoly (55) History lecturer, NN). The central idea of this 'botched repair ending in collapse' metaphor was also present in younger respondents. Whatever the views on the new state that took the USSR's place, there is a fairly strong consensus among respondents of varying ages that the USSR could have been reformed in a different way, that the collapse was avoidable. While *'some things were right to happen, like for example democratization, legalization of other non-communist parties'*, on the other hand *'the rest of it was very hurried and rash'*. (Vladislav (28) Postdoctoral researcher Middle Eastern Studies, NN).

This kind of thinking is part of a more general conservatism toward political and social change, a common antipathy rooted in fear that policies promising radical change will lead to ruin:

*I would say that a critical view of radical reform has formed in me, especially to those that were carried out (perestroika MB) because they didn't lead to anything good. This all should have been done, I don't know, more methodically or something. I mean not to break things up in the harshest way but to evolve the system and try and move it in a new direction. Instead they destroyed it all and let things just fall where they would lay.*

Nadia, (26) Lecturer in Asian Studies, NN

Thus, a strong myth is in circulation about the wrongheadedness of perestroika and it causing a downward trajectory. It should be noted here that attitudes toward 1991 were divided, with a split between those seeing it as a



fundamentally negative terms and a substantial minority viewing it in a more positive or neutral terms. What is interesting here is how ‘collapse’ is not remembered as a set of distinct and clear events, such as the August Coup, the signing of the Belazheva Accords in 1991 or the 1993 shelling of the White House. Instead, collapse is more of a process, something experienced and lived from 1988-1998. The consequences of the various hardships to befall ordinary Russians from 1988 (the start of Gorbachev’s more radical phase of perestroika) to 1998 (Russia’s financial default) has clearly left a mark on popular collective memory in young and old alike. Here a younger respondent refers to a similar sense, that the Russia he grew up in was like the morning-after scene of a massive party, leaving the country in a ‘*condition of drunkenness or hangover*’. While he approves of the collapse in terms of the ‘*human freedom*’ it brought, some of this ‘freedom’ produced undesirable results:

*... this also materialised into a gigantic mess, criminality, economic problems, poverty. Therefore we can hardly see 1991 as the start of something good (...) it just brought a new freedom of action, one could choose to study or not, to work or not, to kill or not, but as a normal person I cannot view this kind of freedom positively. Apart from freedom there are other things.*

Alexei (25) Assistant to deputy of Local Assembly, SPB

This ties into a wider sense that lived experience of 1991-1998 discredited liberal values and makes it very difficult to view the end of the USSR as a ‘triumph’ for the Russian people. The cleavage between political idealism and rhetoric versus the grim reality of everyday life makes the idealization of the end of the USSR, which is still attempted, for example, by liberal commentators on Radio Svoboda and Echo Moskvi, lack credibility to many people. Again this is because actual lived experience contradicted the lofty promises; ‘*1991 was only a triumph for the first few days*’ until expectations of ‘*a big improvement (pod"yem)*’ ended with worsening economic conditions as ‘*people with money and pensions or savings lost everything*’. In summary, ‘*people were ready for democracy in 1991 but all we got was a moral decline and an ‘everything goes’ mentality. (moral’nyy upadok i vsedozvolennost’)*

(Evgeny (30) sales manager construction materials, SPB). As one self-professed ‘liberal’ respondent lamented, only ‘*a very small percentage would agree with the things I have said about the importance of human freedom*’ as ‘*the experience of perestroika and then the 90’s really have made people very cynical about liberal ideas*’. As a result of this lived experience, ‘*it is very hard to find a person who would agree with the premise that human life and freedom should hold a priority of place*’. (Igor (26) English language teacher, SPB).

In tracing the rejection of ‘liberal values’, the long decade of 1988-1998 is central as it was one that combined a steady worsening of living standards with broken promises and false hopes:

*1998 (Russia’s default MB) was the key decisive year when people totally and finally gave up hope for liberal values. (...) Our people are really patient/enduring (terpelivyy) and for a long time they accepted the argument that ‘yes this is perestroika and this is a project that will take a lot of time.’ (...) after 98 people said ‘why the hell do we need this so-called freedom when we have nothing to eat?’ It was a turning point.*

Evgeny (30) sales manager construction materials, SPB

It appears recent lived experience influences attitudes to the other historical periods reviewed in this chapter. It is likely that the retrospective ordering of how to understand Russia’s most recent past (1988-1998) has also influenced the development of more positive views toward the Stolypin period and the Brezhnev era, while supporting a more negative views of the October Revolution. The prioritization of stability, order and state cohesion reflect much upon how the fear of disorder, chaos and lawlessness play a vital role in social memory for many respondents, thus forming a vital link in the chain between Russian popular collective memory and actual lived experience of the recent past and present social world.

### **Part three: The Stalinist and Brezhnev periods**

When we turn to how the Soviet phase of Russian history (1917-1991) was treated, we find there to be far less consensus on ‘golden ages’ and ‘disasters’. Dramatically different myths stand in opposition to one another on the two

periods discussed with most frequency, the Stalinist period and the Brezhnev era. One observable tendency about the selection of critical historical junctures from the Soviet era was the way that social frames dominated the selection of a positive era. Those selecting Stalin's industrialization (1928-1938) and the Brezhnev *zastoi* era (1964-1982) were limited to a particular age and social group; the myths of a Soviet golden age were very rarely reproduced by respondents outside these social frames. In fact, it appears that positive versions of Russia under Stalin and Brezhnev are a source of real contention, as I found rich material from respondents presenting these two eras in far more negative ways. Quantitative polling has also revealed a split in the population on this question, although this is not broken down into age and social backgrounds.<sup>70</sup> Below, what is found is that contradicting myths have emerged about both periods that act as a barrier to Soviet periods becoming more accepted in Russia's 'useable past.'

When selected as Russia's most positive period, the Stalinist period of industrialization was generally presented as a 'big step forward for the country' (Artem (49) computer programmer, NN) when the 'country was under construction and developing (Olga (55) Factory worker Avtozavodsk, NN). Interestingly, these positive representations of Stalinist development policies resonated in older respondents with clear family biographies of working class backgrounds, families whose trajectories were largely positive under Stalin-era social mobility. Some Respondents (Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB; Nikolay (52), ex-policeman, retired, SPB) praised this era's scientific achievements and infrastructure projects, progress that for them compares favourably with the current rent-dominated resource economy of Russia. In admiring Stalin-era development in contrast to the shortcomings of today (no running water or sanitation, for example, in one's suburban 'dacha' neighbourhood), the concrete results are seen to justify the rough methods used:

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<sup>70</sup> From 2007-2017 the number viewing Stalinist repression as 'a political necessity that was historically justified' has risen from 9% to 25%. Meanwhile, the proportion viewing it as a 'political crime that cannot be justified' fell from 72% to 39%. As of 2017, as many as 41% understand the terror as being 'mass repression the whole people of our country' <https://www.levada.ru/2017/09/07/16561/> The figure of Stalin appears to be insulated from views on state repression, however. His ratings have been stable, with around 50% viewing him positively and 30% negatively across 2003-2017. These sentiments are consistent even in differently worded polls. <https://www.levada.ru/2016/03/25/figura-stalina-v-obshhestvennom-mnenii-rossii/>

*When I was working in Salekhard not long ago I ended up on a railway built by Stalin as early as 1935. It's 600 km long. Yes, I know prisoners built it, but what's the difference? Obviously there was no money to hire people to do it, the country was isolated. But who cares? ... that is just the way things were developed back then.*

*Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB*

The above quote reflects a commonly found pragmatic sentiment on display throughout these respondents; the harsh methods are accepted as 'the way things had to be back then' and justified by the clear results on show.

One quote, often incorrectly attributed to Churchill, emerged on numerous occasions among those defending or justifying Stalin: 'Stalin found Russia with wooden ploughs but left her with Atomic bombs.' In fact this quote is from the historian Deutscher writing in his 1953 work 'Russia After Stalin'.<sup>71</sup> Its entry into Russian discourse can be dated back to Nina Andreeva's famous anti-perestroika letter of 1988 'I Cannot Forgo My Principles' that, among other things, sought to defend Stalin from his various liberal critics.<sup>72</sup> Here it functions as a shorthand way of saying Stalin's ultimate achievements outweighed the various 'collateral damage' caused by his policies: *'Even if there were some kind of crimes, well they weren't just done by us, they are in many other countries too. If we look at the end result, then we can't forget that Stalin found the country with ploughs and left her with nuclear rockets'*

*Artem (49) computer programmer, NN*

Respondents in this group praised Stalin as a strong and effective manager of people. This harsh and demanding leader managed to force the Russian people into shape and come together. It was his achievement in unifying and mobilizing the Russian people that ensured the nation's survival after the German invasion in 1941. This idea is often condensed into the myth that *'the international situation forced us to mobilise society'* and, therefore, Stalin's

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<sup>71</sup> The actual quote is, naturally, more nuanced: 'The core of Stalin's genuine historic achievement lies in the fact that he found Russia working with the wooden plough and left her equipped with atomic piles.'  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1953/russiaafterstalin.htm>

<sup>72</sup> In one part she claims Churchill, a sworn enemy of Bolshevism, came to respect Stalin in later life and she produces a long, fabricated quote Churchill never said ending with the quip 'He found Russia with wooden ploughs and left her with equipped with atomic weapons'. For details see: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120216082258/http://www.sadcom.com/pins/about/andreeva.htm>

policies resulted in *'the successful resolution of our problems precisely in the conditions we found ourselves in'*. Even though Stalinism was *'a catastrophe, bringing the death of thousands of people, another serious blow for our country'*, all the same this was *'the best of all the evils we had to choose from then'* (Viktor (22) International Relations Student, NN). This essentially presents Stalinism as a series of 'forced measures'; it also justifies it as the best of the available development scenarios on offer in those difficult times. Some older respondents with victims of Stalinist repression in their own family tree still viewed his policies as vital to the survival of the country:

*those who carried out these policies understood it would not lead to any golden age of prosperity for our people. It was just done so we would not be destroyed. Collectivization was an awful thing but it was necessary. Industrialization was harsh but it was necessary (...) Therefore the view of Stalin in my family, probably like the majority of Soviet people, is that Stalin was some kind of mighty state power (nekaya moshchnaya gosudarstvennaya sila) that allowed us to achieve success. We faced a hostile encirclement, things were uncomfortable and hard and this was seen as by-product of our development path. Nobody held a grudge towards Stalin for what he did and when he died my mother even cried for him.*

Leonid (45) Religious history lecturer, NN

Although these more sympathetic views towards Stalin were largely confined to a certain social and generational group, aspects of it appear to filter down to younger respondents and reinforce an identifiable trend in respondents claiming 'Russia needs a strong hand'. Such a viewpoint (as will be seen in chapter six) has implications for one's own political stance today. Here Stalin is harsh and unforgiving, but also patriotic and committed to the interests of Russia. This image of Stalin sees him as unrelenting in his drive to improve the country, smashing corruption and crime along the way. At the same time, Stalin's policies are supported as they led to a strong industrialised economy independent from the world economy. It is no great leap to see the idealization of such qualities as dovetailing well with Putin's image as the uncompromising and tough leader of an embattled Russia today. These values say much about Russia's desired future for this group of respondents.

It is, however, important to note that these pro-Stalin positions are contested by extremely negative representations of the Stalin period. Indeed, collectivization and industrialization came in a close second place behind the October Revolution as the worst period for Russia's modern history. The segment choosing this as Russia's worst period crossed geographical, age, gender and social background/professions lines, suggesting this anti-Stalin myth has the power to be transmitted across the population more generally. The first main line in anti-Stalin positions, was to emphasise that his policies were '*extremely unfair*' in how they '*dealt with people*' by '*removing their property against their will*' (Svetlana (25) Postgraduate researcher sociology, NN). Anecdotes from the period underline the inhuman conditions people faced under an '*awful and frightening dictator*', and that '*being five minutes late for work*' or '*taking little bits of grain left over after the state harvesters*' could land one with a lengthy prison sentence (Oleg (49) Construction site foreman, SPB).

In terms of emotions, among these respondents this period provokes feelings of anguish, shock and shame; the idea that such things could be perpetrated on ordinary citizens is shocking:

*So many innocent people (...) It was like a tank rolling over a whole family (...)* Everyone would suffer if the father was declared an enemy of the people. They also sent the wives to jail, the kids weren't allowed to study (...)  
*It was awful, I am actually ashamed of this chapter in our history.*

Natalya (50) Accountant. NN

Discussions on the awful human cost of Stalinist policies act as a counter-narrative that rejects the arguments of his apologists. The wider employment of the Stalin era as a 'useable past' appears blocked by the sense the period was one of upheaval, arbitrary violence and brutality. An interesting development in those who reproduced negative memories of the Stalinist era was to do so through the prism of one's own family history. For some, '*the moment of collectivization opened a great chasm opened up in our family histories*' meaning that the fate of these relatives remains unknown (Lubov (43) Private tutor, SPB). In other cases, memories of relatives falling victim to state repression are more carefully preserved and transmitted:

*Our great-grandfather had a good peasant farm, some cows, some horses and they called him a 'Kulak'. Then there were those who were drunks, who didn't want to work but drink. They were the envious ones, they had nothing and they passed power to them. Can you imagine the human factor here? To wipe out the well-off person, to take what they have and grind them into nothing. It was utter lawlessness. (...)When the authorities give the opportunity for such people to rise to the top, this is the most awful thing.*

**Sergei (29) Business Development, NN**

This narrative also ties in with discussions of how the Bolshevik revolution 'destroyed the best of the Russian nation' and suggests there is strong potential for an anti-Bolshevik version of Russian history in the twentieth century. One respondent said she would *'draw a line to link 1917 right up to 1956 for example, as an awful period because of Stalin, the repressions, murders (...)It was like an extermination of people (...)the authorities exterminated people with ability and land, those who could look after themselves, that was a total disaster!'* (**Marta (54) retired, SPB**).

The current role of Cossacks in Russian society and the role of the Orthodox Church would seem to make these positions worthy of sympathy from conservative Russia, thus not limiting the anti-Stalin narrative to liberal circles. On the other hand, other respondents, like Leonid above, still retain pro-Stalin views despite his own family's narrative of suffering state repression. Nonetheless, narratives based on the authentic grounds of family history and emotional representations of the period have clear emotional potency. Understood in the longer view, these violent policies de-legitimize the Soviet state under Stalin and provide ample cause to resist any idealization of him as a leader. After all, it is hard to argue for the 'normality' of the Stalinist state: *'almost one million were shot and that is not normal, it can't be justified. Have you ever seen a successful state that kills hundreds of thousands of its own citizens? That is totally unnatural'* (**Arkady (27) Computer Programmer, NN**). Given that such a substantial chunk of respondents were reproducing powerful negative myths about the Stalin era, it appears unlikely a myth will emerge to unite the two camps. The battle for how to view the Stalinist past can be expected to rage on in Russia's mythscape.

### *The Late Soviet Period*

The other Soviet period to receive significant attention as a positive period was the Brezhnev era. Here as with the Stalin era, we find again a collection of respondents linked by age (all over forty). This time, however, they rooted positive portrayals of the period with their own memories of growing up here. They are complemented by those respondents who selected the market reform period (1991-1999) as the worst period for Russia, which came in at third place overall in terms of negative periods. This group included a few younger respondents who also related this to the story of their own families in the post-Soviet environment. This provides evidence of the importance of lived experience alongside social frames and generational linkages in transmitting memory. However, as with the Stalin era, these positions are very much disputed; another section of respondents painted the late Soviet period as a 'dead-end' and viewed perestroika or the nineties as a period of new freedoms and possibilities.

For those with positive views of the *zastoi* era, the 'normality' of the Brezhnev era is agreed upon. This 'normality' revolved around features such as universal social welfare, education, certainty in the future and numerous opportunities. The key theme in these images was that of cohesion and security, the idea that this late Soviet society was a paradigm of stability. These respondents seemed to view the USSR as 'heaven for ordinary people', a place where one could be sure about what the future would hold: *I didn't feel any particular stagnation (zastoi), conditions were very good and stable. It was clear how life would develop then, how the country was developing. There was confidence in the future (uverennost' v budushchem)* (Artem (49) computer programmer, NN). Condensed versions of this myth emerged in younger respondents as well, who appeared to accept this transmitted version of the Brezhnev era as a desirable past and suggests a shared preoccupation with stability in the present.

As we will see in more detail in chapter six on representations of Russia's state and political system, the Brezhnev era state is also presented as 'normal' in its ability to deliver acceptable services in healthcare and education. The confidence in being able to know what you would 'get for your money' is also



part of this: *'I firmly knew that after I finished school I could go to college and that won't cost anything. I had guaranteed work; everybody worked. The minimum wage of 80 Roubles in those days would let a person live in peace, it was more than enough. There were no problems'* (Anton (52) ex-officer, small business owner, SPB). The stagnation era is clearly socially framed; respondents rooted their understandings on how their own families experienced 'zastoi'. Remembering their childhood and their parents' stable lives, these older respondents do not remember 'stagnation'; instead it is a time when 'we never lived better'. These respondents 'forget' the social and economic problems facing the country at the time. Furthermore, many of these older respondents came from families who benefited from the Soviet modernization project and, conversely, gained little from its demise.

In one good example, we find a short family history of peasants moving from a small village to live in the dynamic and growing Soviet city of Gorky. Here the lifestyle in the late Soviet period is explicitly contrasted with that of the capitalist West and, the pressures people face in contemporary 'capitalist' post-Soviet Russia are outlined:

*We know why people are on anti-depressants in USA and Western Europe. They are always under pressure to figure out how to live tomorrow, the battle to survive. My parents, the parents of our generation, they worked, they enjoyed life, they built socialism. (...) Waking up each morning I knew perfectly well I was defended by the best army in the world. When they raised the red flag at school I was proud of my country, it was a feeling of genuine patriotism. I saw things being built all around me. I remember as a little boy, them telling my parents to go and pick whatever flat they wanted in the new builds. We came from a village of 1500 people where we had nothing but wooden buildings and here were new flats, comfortable houses with central heating.*

**Igor, (41) Lecturer in International Relations, NN**

Thus, it was common for older respondents to see the Brezhnev era as comparing positively with the current era. One could argue this nostalgia reflects a longing for a certain kind of freedom from post-Soviet capitalist

reality; liberation from the burdens of economic pressure, the pressure of competition, the sense of relative deprivation in comparison to more successful people, and general daily hardship to make ends meet. This sentiment can also be seen in words of a former Soviet engineer, who describes how most were ‘*comfortable*’ puttering along with a ‘*minimum but stable and guaranteed life*’ that was ‘*timetabled out for you practically up to your pension*’ (Pavel, (58) IT specialist, NN).

Quantitative polling on this period of Russian history suggests the outright majority view the period positively, while a consistent minority reject this.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps what stops nostalgic images of this secure and happy time from enjoying a more dominant space in the mythscape of Russian popular collective memory are the plentiful counter images that present it as a musty and dank period of ‘dead end’ development. This counter-myth is based on the ‘abnormal’ elements in late Soviet life such as the lack of economic efficiency and shortages of goods, the sense of a mighty superpower suffering from a primitive internal consumer market. One aspect of this was the sense that ‘*there was lots of money about but you couldn’t buy anything with it*’ and important items, like automobiles, could only be bought ‘*through personal connections. (po blatu)*’. For example, one respondent recalled how his grandfather, who had a good job and the needed contacts, had to wait three years to get his hands a *Zaporozhetz*, which he described as an ‘*ugly Soviet mini*’ (Arseny (41) Business development, NN). This memory of stable incomes being negated by the lack of available consumer goods contrasts sharply with the current era in a negative way, when many segments of Russian society can save or borrow to buy something, be it an iPhone, a car or a pair of new shoes.

In the memories of late Soviet life outside of Moscow and Leningrad, the picture of poverty and shortages was stark, hardly something that would endear younger people to romanticizing the period. This was particularly the case in respondents whose families grew up outside of Moscow and Leningrad, where ‘*the people lived in absolute squalor (v polnoy nishchete)*’ (Sergei (29) Business Development, NN). Older respondents recalled the miserable food rationing system

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<sup>73</sup> Levada Centre polling show the number viewing the period positively has risen from 36% in 1994 to 51% in 2016. Over the same period those viewing it negative was stable (16% to 18%), while those seeing it as ‘not offering anything in particular’ fell from 33% to 19%. <https://www.levada.ru/2016/03/01/praviteli-v-otechestvennoj-istorii/>

offering *'400 grams of sausage a month, 200 grams of butter a month'* and the so-called *'sausage trains'* of provincials going on '22 hour journeys' to Leningrad or Moscow to bring additional food back home (Oleg (49) Construction site foreman, SPB). These examples of Soviet era food distribution and consumer goods access relate a picture of backwardness, especially in relation to the more advanced West. Critical views of disengaged workers, inefficient economics, corruption and shortages, come together to produce a coherent view of the period as a 'dead end' in Russia's development. The sentiment here is that the USSR was *'rotting'* and *things were falling apart from the inside'* and, thus, a *'new path'* was needed (Vera (43) IT Project Manager, NN). This presents the late Soviet period as a 'dead end', with grey, incapable men at the top of the system unable to adapt and unfit to govern. Here the central idea was that *'bad management, especially from the mid-70's onwards'* restricted and suppressed young people, all of which *'made people desire fundamental change in the existing system'* (Alexander (25) Business development manager, SPB). Another way of saying this was *'old people were the only ones in power, people who didn't give a toss, didn't need anything as they had reached the top and thought they could tell the young folk how to do things...'* (Pavel (27) export-import business, SPB).

Many younger respondents in this research reject nostalgic views of the late Soviet period. This is partly because so many older people have anecdotes of poverty, corruption and greyness that do not resemble a normal or desirable past. Overall, when comparing younger and older respondents' views to the late Soviet period, we find younger respondents well informed of the economic woes of this system and its failure to create consumer abundance. The clear resistance shown to nostalgic and pro-Soviet images of this period show the limited utility of the Soviet past in the wider collective memory and useable past. The positive nostalgic view of a kinder society and better living conditions is contested by a critical view that underlines the 'backwardness', 'corruption', 'greyness' and 'unnatural social relations' of the period. The former position appears to long for a return of aspects of the 'Soviet', the latter does not look at it as a model of 'normality' or something worthy of emulation. Again there is difficulty in synthesising these two positions into a workable

myth for the nation. Overall, positive representations of Soviet times, in focusing on the Stalin and Brezhnev periods, reveal something about certain values held by older respondents. Rather than actually demanding a return to these older systems, the respondents use these myths to criticize the present and suggest an agenda for the future. This includes demands for a state that cares about social justice and welfare, a stronger and more industrialised economy and improved infrastructure, real investment in education, healthcare and science, and, as we will see in chapter seven, a restoration of influence and power on the world stage. These Soviet-inspired versions of normality are clearly in circulation and, as we will see in the subsequent chapters, play an important role in Russian national identity today.

### *Conclusion*

This examination of Russian collective memory ‘from below’ has highlighted a number of key points. Firstly, a preoccupation with stability and order are vital to understanding the selection of 1900-1914 and 2000-2014 as positive periods for the country. In both cases the country is seen to be on the rise, showing good economic growth and on the path to being a ‘normal’ ‘strong’ ‘respected’ European power. The consensus on 1917-1922 as the worst period in Russia’s history is a logical counterpoint to this; here Russia was torn off the path of positive development and plunged her regicide and fratricide, chaos and destruction. This finding is supported by quantitative polling evidence but, employing qualitative analysis, additional light can be shed on why 1900-1914 and 2000-2014 win sufficient consensus to be ‘useable’. Namely, that these periods harmonise well with a certain social and political conservatism that combines a preference for a strong, orderly state with phobia of collapse and disintegration.

I would argue that interpretations of the recent past (1988-1998) and its relationship to the present heavily influence why the above myths appeal. The aftershocks of the nineties are still relatively fresh in the minds of both young and old respondents and this appears to represent one source of the fixation on ‘stability’ in constructing the ‘desirable past’. Thus, the above myths are congruent both with the hopes and fears of the population, but also with the

social reality and lived experience of many respondents. The merging of 1985-1991 with the 'wild nineties' as one downward trajectory is common across generations and has important implications for attitudes to political change in Russia today. Many respondents seem to interpret Russia's history through the prism of 1988-1998; this is also the 'abnormal' and 'undesirable' past and acts as a vital discursive frame for those describing a 'desirable future'. The themes that have arisen here in Russian collective memory return in later chapters; the imprint of 1988-1998 clearly plays an important role in modern Russian national identity.

This chapter has also highlighted that, while nostalgia for the USSR is present in Russian society, what is not made apparent in quantitative polling is how opinion is polarised along social and age lines. This leaves the Soviet past as an unpromising resource in building a common historical memory. While more work would be needed to confirm this, it appears to be a normative split across social and generational lines. There is also a fault line that follows divergent family biographies. Those with stories of their family benefiting from the Soviet modernization project often had experiences of hardship and loss post 1991. Conversely, those with relatives repressed in the Soviet period were more likely to adopt a negative view of the Soviet phase of Russia's past. It may be that personal and family trajectories post-1991 also play an important role in this split.

This chapter has also underlined what Soviet nostalgia means for a number of older people. Rather than a reflection of any desire to reinstate the USSR, their portrayals of the Stalin and/or Brezhnev eras as 'great times' was more both an indictment of current conditions (lack of industrial development or poor social services) and a signal of support for some of Putin's policies (increased pensions and protection of state industries). Above all, these older respondents still took these periods as times of 'normality' and use the past to highlight the 'abnormality' of the present (lack of good free healthcare, expensive housing, corruption, collapsing infrastructure). In stark contrast, respondents with a dimmer view of these periods saw them as 'abnormal' in comparison to the present: the murderous ruthlessness of Stalinist policies, the lack of freedom, the absence of simple consumer goods are taken as aspects of an 'undesirable'

past. What this split in normality positions means is that appealing to the Soviet for a desirable past, present and future will remain a limited one; only certain social and age groups will find this credible. This perhaps explains why state historical memory takes such an ambiguous stance to the Soviet past.

If we exclude the Great Patriotic War, it appears non-Soviet periods are easier to employ as a 'useable past'. Themes around the pre-revolutionary past and the 'disaster of October' can generate consensus and state actors are more than ready to refer to certain 'lessons of October 1917'. This is reproduced in a *longue durée* view of Russian history that characterises it as cyclical: stable, ordered phases are followed chaotic and destructive phases. The main explanation for how the country was sucked into phases of *smuta* (chaos and disorder) is the convergence of weak central leadership, hostile external forces and internal upheaval. Three themes are central to this *longue durée* and are vital components of the dominant nationalist discourse in Russia today. These are: (a) Russia must avoid internal upheaval at all cost (b) Russia must be ruled by a strong hand (c) external forces seek Russia's dissolution and must be resisted. As will be seen later in this thesis, these three positions interact and reinforce one another and are important pillars in support for Putin's domestic and foreign policy. Before turning to the world of politics, it is important to account for another central component in national identity: how the lines of 'us' and 'them', inclusion and exclusion are drawn among Russians today.

## Chapter Five.

### **Inclusion and exclusion in the Russian ‘we’: Searching for a common sense of Russianness**

This chapter sheds light on how ethnicity, race and nationhood are discussed in a Russian context, showing when and how people identify themselves and perceive of others in terms of nation and ethnicity. At the heart of this question, from the point of view of the state, is to promote an inclusive identity in Russia’s multi-ethnic society. This involves consolidating people around the ‘nation’, a civic community with shared political values. In part, the challenge is to successfully articulate a sense of ‘Russianness’ that is compatible with what is written in the 1993 Constitution: ‘we are a multinational people’. President Putin (2004) recognised this challenge in his first term, when he claimed there were already solid grounds for seeing ‘people of Russia as a united nation’ (*rossiyskii kak narod edinaya natsiia*). In a more recent speech at the Valdai Conference of 2013, he expanded on what was needed for this ‘united nation’: ‘In order to maintain the nation’s unity, people must develop a civic identity on the basis of shared values, a patriotic consciousness, civic responsibility and solidarity, respect for the law, and a sense of responsibility for their homeland’s fate, without losing touch with their ethnic or religious roots’ (Putin 2013).

Below, I will unpick some of the various elements of post-Soviet Russian in-group and out-group dynamics, revealing some important Soviet legacies still active today in Russia’s distinctive form of ‘multiculturalism’. This includes the rejection of ‘nationalism’ and ‘ethnicity’ in principle and the adoption of a conservative Soviet-style patriotism. I will also explore how a certain Soviet-style Russocentric version of the civic nation is being reproduced, as well as examining the salience of ‘imperial consciousness’: something that owes much to the pre-revolutionary and Soviet heritage. The above is an important part of the dominant nationalist discourse of Russia today. I will argue that this is because it is in harmony with some key elements of Russian national identity. As we will see, the key challenge to this vision of the Russian nation and Russianness comes not from democratic or liberal ideas; instead it is part of a

parochial ‘put Russia first’ nationalism that is hostile to certain non-Russian elements such as labour migrants or the North Caucasus region. These nationalistic sentiments may explain why large numbers show receptivity for the slogan ‘Russia for the Russians’ (*Rossiya dlya russkikh*) in quantitative polling.<sup>74</sup> Before moving to the empirical findings, however, it is necessary to outline some key theoretical considerations in studying national and ethnic feeling in ordinary people.

### **Theoretical approaches to the nation-ness in everyday life**

At the heart of research into how the nation is imagined as a community are ‘shared values’ behind a common ‘civic identity’, as well as ‘patriotic consciousness’ and attitudes to ethnicity. National identity is as much connected to everyday social relations as it is with understandings of history or politics. A central part of this is the us-them dynamic that is built on ‘empathetic attachments to those included within the group, and distance and difference from those without’ (Suny 2012: 20). Thus, the aim is to account for how ethnic and national boundaries are made, as the ‘strategic nature of practices of categorization and association’ (Wimmer 2013: 4-6) can reveal how boundaries of group-making are determined in inclusivist and exclusivist ways. One should not expect, however, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion to be mutually exclusive; research in social psychology suggests both are required to build firm identities. In other words, inclusive sentiment, such as shared in-group values, may often be accompanied by exclusivist language, such as hostility to an out-group (Taifel 1982: 15). Thus, we need not be surprised if, in the worldview of ordinary people, we find harmonic, inclusivist visions of in-group cohesion co-existing with exclusivist language that refuses membership of the nation to certain out-groups.

In attempting to locate inclusivist and exclusivist sentiment, it is useful to examine the meanings and understandings emerging from everyday social interaction. This is of importance as ‘it is ultimately in and through everyday experience – as much as in political contestation or cultural articulation – that

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<sup>74</sup> From 2002-2016, the proportions of outright support for the slogan has fluctuated from 14-23%, while conditional support has been steadily hovering at the 35-40% mark. Around 21%-28% reject the slogan as ‘fascism’.  
<https://www.levada.ru/2016/10/11/intolerantnost-i-ksenofobiya/>



ethnicity and nationhood are invested with meaning and produced and reproduced as basic categories of social and political life' (Brubaker et al 2006: 363-4). Thus, we attempt to trace whether a common identity emerges from everyday and common-sense divisions between 'us' and 'them', 'enemy' and 'friend'. Here we are dealing with a social construct, one that is referred to in this chapter as the Russian 'we'. It is important to underline that this construct does not owe its existence purely to the efforts of actors 'from above', such as state or media discourse; it is also shaped by social practices and everyday experience. Thus, defining who belongs to the 'nation' is an on-going and fluid process, one that can be challenged and is subject to change.

In examining the picture 'from below' we look to understand 'folk sociologies' by revealing the 'common-sense ways of carving up the social world' employed across the population (Hirschfeld 1996: 9). According to Brubaker, this 'carving up' of the social world is achieved by 'everyday encounters, practical categories, common sense knowledge, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, interactional cues, discursive frames<sup>75</sup>, organisational routines, social networks and institutional forms' (Brubaker 2004: 2). Antonio Gramsci (1971) also showed an interest in the role of everyday common-sense positions, both in supporting the hegemonic ideas of the present and acting as a barrier to the political projects of elites. In this chapter, we find that common-sense understandings of nation and ethnicity do not correspond neatly with the theoretical elaborations of the elite. The 'ethnic', 'civic' and 'imperial' shades of nationalism blur; instead of clarity we find complex combinations and interplays, as well as contradictory rational and emotional positions.

Everyday common-sense understandings of nation and ethnicity are important in defining the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion from the body of the nation. Andreas Wimmer (2013: 50) highlighted three forms of integration: (i) 'incorporation mode': when an ethnic group is identified as the category into which all should merge; (ii) 'amalgamation mode': the drive to create new nation out of different ethnic groups; (iii) 'emphasis shifting mode': the move to a new level of category that bypasses existing ethnic/national differences. In

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<sup>75</sup> A discursive frame is the set of cultural viewpoints that informs the practices of a community or social movement organizations. Discursive frames form the cultural resources that shape, motivate, and give meaning to collective action 'Frames help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action' (Benford and Snow, 2000: 614).

the Russian case, we find most resonance with types (i) and (iii). Furthermore, Wimmer (2013: 11-12) suggested there are four main ways of reproducing basic categories and establishing boundaries:

*... those that seek to redraw a boundary by either expanding or limiting the range of people included in one's own ethnic category; those that modify existing boundaries either by challenging the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories, or by changing one's own position within a boundary system, or by emphasizing other, non-ethnic forms of belonging*

In this chapter we will pay most attention to the first of these strategies, the question of how boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are (re)drawn. Here we discover how people internalize concepts promoted in state and media circles, and, very often, construct their own meanings of these 'from below'. Here, by studying 'the "micropolitics" of categories', we can reveal 'the ways in which the categorized appropriate, internalize, subvert, evade or transform the categories that are imposed on them' (Brubaker 2004: 13).

As mentioned above, this chapter traces both in-group and out-group mechanisms and treats both as essential to the maintenance of group identity. In tracing the 'in-group' dynamic we seek commonality – this concerns the existence of common attributes to a group or a feeling of belonging together (in Max Weber's term *Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl*). In examining 'categorical communality' and a 'feeling of belonging together' we should expect to find part of the imagined nation – that people who do not know each other and are not really connected 'buy into' idea of large collective 'nation' – 'a powerfully imagined and strongly felt commonality' (Brubaker 2004: 47) Following analysis of Brubaker, we can identify certain 'stereotypes, schemas and social categorizations' employed to support this feeling of belonging and counting as an 'in-group.' At the same time, the other side of this coin is to trace the mechanisms of exclusion; how certain 'groups' are transformed into an 'Other'. Here more negative 'stereotypes, schemas and social categorizations' are employed to shore up 'groupist interpretations of the social world' (Brubaker 2004: 74).

While xenophobia is common across the world in the twenty-first century, the cultural context and specifics differ from country to country. Relations between ‘host’ communities and ‘outsiders’ can be tense and the challenge of integrating different groups will not disappear. Of particular utility in understanding these processes of ‘othering’ is social identity theory, a theoretical framework that explains ethnically-driven feelings, xenophobia and discrimination at the level of individuals and groups. In trying to explain what makes certain individuals more prone to this kind of thinking, the ‘social contact hypothesis’ (Hayes and Dowds 2006: 456) is backed by significant empirical evidence (Amir 1976; Savelkoul et al 2011). This hypothesis posits that the less actual social contact people have with ‘Others’ is connected to higher levels of hostility to ‘outsiders’, a connection that has been established in a Russian context (Kosmarskaya, Savin (2016: 149). Limited contact, on the other hand, deprives people of knowledge of what the ‘Others’ really do and leads to a preoccupation with perceived ethno-cultural differences. This, in turn, allows the survival and activation of a range of negative categories, schemas and stereotypes.

Another important question in social identity theory is what factors make certain groups more/less important as ‘out-groups’. Here group conflict theory claims these tensions reflect a real conflict of socio-economic interests in the battle for resources between different groups (Bobo 1983). In some cases, however, xenophobia occurs without obvious competition for jobs or welfare services. Here it is the sudden visible increase in the presence of the ‘Other’ that threatens a feeling of dominance among the majority. As Lauren McLaren (2003: 916) pointed out, ‘it is not so much self-interest or competition for resources that drive individual attitudes, but concern for protecting certain cultural symbols of the dominant group’. Here the sense of ‘invasion’ or ‘threat’ is connected to on the idea that these groups do not ‘fit’ with the culture, values and behaviour of the ‘normal’ majority. This connects to the ‘defended neighbourhood theory’ (Bevelander and Otterbeck 2010: 407); the idea that sudden influxes of culturally dissimilar groups into neighbourhoods causes a backlash as it violates existing ‘norms’. This brings us back to ‘normality’, which also emerges as an important issue in the Russian ‘we’.

Again, the ‘frames’ employed when discussing what is ‘normal’ are important. In this chapter we find the importance of Soviet frames in discussing a ‘normal’ multi-ethnic environment, a ‘normal’ migration policy, ‘normal’ migrant behaviour and a ‘normal’ calibration of interethnic relations. In some ways, these visions of normality are not being met causing powerful feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction that put strain on more harmonious visions of Russia as a multinational space. Below, we will consider how certain ideas promoted by the state and media about ‘who belongs to the nation’ are actually understood and applied by ordinary people. Here we find certain discourses that secure the place of the in-group values, while highlighting the deviance of out-groups. When we examine popular attitudes ‘from below’, we find that popular discourse can deviate from the desired meanings of policy makers and cultural elites.

### **The empirical findings**

A central feature that emerged in common-sense perceptions of the Russian ‘we’ is the co-existence of open, inclusivist sentiment with regards in-group membership, alongside harder more demanding visions of the nation that exclude certain groups as ‘Other’ or ‘alien’. The first part of the chapter covers more inclusivist sentiments of membership to the Russian national community, ideas that are more about harmony and union, and show how ordinary people respond to *group-making as a project* – the drive of the state, media and other actors to promote a coherent ‘Russian national identity’, which involves the use of terminology such as *russkii*, *rossiyskii*, *mnogonatsional’naya Rossiya*, *patriot* and *natsionalist*, as well as definitions of Russianness (*russkost*). Popular understandings of these terms show how ordinary people make sense of often-ambiguous state discourse.

Consensus on a number of points unites respondents across age and social lines. This includes advocacy of open and rather inclusive definitions of Russianness, rejection of ethnicity as important to being Russian (*russkii*), rejection of ‘nationalism’ in principle and receptivity to an inclusive and simple, ‘loving’ patriotism. All of these points show continuity with the Soviet legacy and also suggest that Yeltsin-era nation-building rhetoric failed to put

down solid roots. Furthermore, positive myths about Russia's multi-ethnic traditions, which are presented as differing greatly from those of the West, do much to reinforce these popular understandings. There is little evidence of any serious challenges to narratives portraying the Imperial and Soviet periods in a positive light. As we will see, the sense that Russia has no 'colonial' or 'imperialist' past to confront encourages the feeling that non-Russian national groups (or the *malie narodi*) are comfortable and content within the current Eurasian multi-ethnic family. Below, I will consider how harmonic elements of the Russian 'we' not only fit well with the non-ethnic, civic conception of the Russian nation state that is promoted by current state nationality policy; they also are line with aspects of Russia's imperial and Soviet traditions.

In the second half of the chapter we turn to what might be called 'fractures' in the above picture of a cohesive, inclusive civic identity, where consensus starts to break down. Here we will examine why many who supported Russia's multi-ethnic character and rejected nationalism in theory, still took up rather 'nationalist' opinions and stances, such as hostility to people from the North Caucasus and labour migrants. This is excellent evidence of how inclusivist in-group sentiment is often combined with exclusivist out-group sentiment, as boundaries are drawn 'from below' to highlight those groups barred from membership of the Russian 'we'.

In the case of the North Caucasus, I examine the commonly reproduced stereotypes and schema highlighting the perceived hostility and disrespect these people show, as well as shared assumptions about the cultural 'backwardness' of 'these mountain people'. The idea that this region is a drain on 'our resources' suggests a redrawing of the lines of inclusion has occurred, leaving the North Caucasus outside the parameters of the Russian nation. This is part of a 'put Russia first' discourse of some importance to this thesis. An important feature in these discussions is the salience of 'imperial' or 'statist' consciousness in justifying the retention of the North Caucasus in the Russian Federation. Rather than any reference to fraternal friendships of *malie narodi* or retaining the unity of the Russian civic national community, the focus is on Russia's great power requirements and the burden of responsibility for keeping the region stable.

Finally, attitudes to migrants reveal division along generation lines, highlighting a split between some of the older, Soviet-educated respondents, still showing attachment to ‘internationalism’, and younger respondents, who used ‘civic’ and ‘inclusivist’ rhetoric to make assimilationist demands’. One important element in examining attitudes to migration is the common sense view that the situation is ‘abnormal’. Digging deeper, I explore how Soviet-inspired frames of reference largely constitute ‘normality’ and how the absence of normality is linked to how ‘othering’ occurs in a Russian context. At the heart of the problem, from the point of view of respondents, is the failure or refusal of these new comers to learn and embrace Russian language, culture, history and traditions, something that was not the case in the Soviet period. It would appear that the conclusion of Fran Markowitz (2000: 165) still holds true today: ‘Russia’s multinationalism demands an agreement from non-Russian people to accept Russia’s cultural superiority (...) especially in regards to language and daily behaviour’.

### **Part one. Inclusivist sentiment: harmonic ideas of in-group membership**

#### *Russkii and rossiyanin: The two words for ‘Russian’*

As mentioned previously, in the Russian language, two adjectives exist for the word ‘Russian’, *rossiyskii* and *russkii*.<sup>76</sup> Exploring the common-sense understandings of the meanings of these two words reveal how they are used to express common attributes and sense of common belonging. For around a third of respondents, the meanings of *russkii* and *rossiyanin* were straightforward. These respondents tended not to delve deeper and reproduced a rather textbook answer: ‘*Rossiyanin is one’s citizenship and Russian is a nationality (natsional’nost’)*’ (...) *Russia has many nationalities (...) Millions of people with different nationalities. But at the same time they are rossiyanine, because they have a Russian (rossiyskii) passport.*’ (Nadezhda (30) nanny, SPB). This approach accepts the Yeltsin-era concept of *rossiyanin* and Soviet-style understandings of nationality as a fixed category from birth passed on or determined by parents. However, a majority of respondents offered more to explain the

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<sup>76</sup> The first, *rossiyanin*, re-emerged in the Yeltsin era and reflected a civic conception of Russianness connected to being a citizen of the Russian Federation (*Rossiyskaya Federatsiia*), which was described as a ‘multinational country’ (*mnogonatsional’naya strana*) in the new constitution. The second term, *russkii*, was used in the Soviet period to describe Russianness in terms of ‘*natsional’nost’*’ (nationality/ethnicity), viewing the *russkie* as one of the ‘national groups’ (*natsiia*) making up *mnogonatsional’naya Rossiia*.

existence and inter-relationship of the two adjectives. This is an example of how ordinary people subvert and transform categories offered ‘from above’, invest them with new meanings and reproduce them ‘from below’.

In deeper discussion of the two terms, respondents often viewed *Rossiyanin* as a dry, formal and official label lacking real meaning: ‘*The status of the term “rossiyanin” is rather artificial. I don’t understand what a “Rossiyanin” is. For me the words “russkii” and “Rus” are closer to me.*’ (Alexander (25) Business development manager, SPB). For these respondents, *rossiyanin* is a political construct with little meaning to them directly that they would not self-apply in any context other than in official documents. It appears that many would find little resonance with the statement ‘I am proud to be a *rossiyanin*’. For members of the older generation, *rossiyanin* was a still a ‘new word’ tied to ‘the appearance of democracy’ and Boris Yeltsin that was unclear in meaning (Denis (41) Journalist, NN).

*Russkii*, on the other hand, had a far deeper significance: ‘*the adjective: “russkii” says much more about you than the word “rossiyanin” as is about some kind of very rich history and culture that goes back to our roots and can tell more about you*’ (Svetlana (25) Postgraduate researcher sociology, NN). Many pointed out that calling oneself a ‘*rossiyanin*’ would be ‘*strange*’ pointing out, for example, ‘*rossiyanka for me is more about belonging to a state while russkaya is more about the merging/unification of people (ob’yedineniye lyudey)*’ (Eva (26) Unemployed, university graduate, NN). It is important to note that this sense of ‘unification’ makes no reference to blood or kinship. Instead, being *russkii* was often described as a ‘thing of the soul’, something one ‘feels within’.<sup>77</sup> Here, the ‘feeling of belonging’ is literal; being Russian means sharing a common feeling with other Russians. While being a *rossiyanin* merely refers to those simply ‘*living on the territory of the Russian Federation*’, being *russkii* is about the ‘*soul*’ (*dukh*) (Julia (47) Assistant in film set production, SPB). The above offers strong evidence that the term *rossiyanin* has struggled to put down roots in Russian society and, despite the contemporary efforts of Putin era nationality policy to promote the slogan ‘we are all *rossiyane*’, this term still fails to

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<sup>77</sup> Here we must be careful in offering too direct a translation of *dukh* as ‘soul’ – in Russian it covers a broader range of ideas such as consciousness, the metaphysical, feelings, the spirit within one’s self.

resonate as powerful category of in-group belonging. In contrast, *russkii* is felt to reverberate back across the centuries and is of far more utility in describing commonality.

***Meanings of being russkii: rejection of ethnic grounds, the Soviet legacy and the demands of assimilation***

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that the deeper connections respondents felt towards being *russkii* is part of a wider ‘ethnicization’ of Russian identity at the expense of more civic and state-orientated versions. In fact, when respondents defined Russianness (*ruskost*) there was a consistent rejection of ethnic criteria. According to popular thinking, ‘*Russia was never only a “ruskaya” country. Here everything is intermingled (...), so many national groups (natsiy) have intermixed that it is impossible to talk of “pure” russkie or “pure” Tatars (Olga (55) Factory worker Avtozavodsk, NN).* As a result of this intermixing and gradual expansion, ‘*it is impossible to distinguish the russkie from the rest, (...). Russia has always been a common home. It is an empire and, like any empire, she absorbs people into her, these people then live together for centuries*’ (Julia (47) Assistant in film set production, SPB). This presents Russia as a vast mixing space and the Russian state as an ‘empire’. Thus, part of being *russkie* is rejecting the narrow confines of ethnicity and embracing a supraethnic imperial identity.

An important element of this is the rejection of ‘nationalists’ and ‘nationalism’. For the last Soviet generation ‘nationalism’ is a tainted word carrying overtones of divisive ethnic-based rhetoric.<sup>78</sup> This view of nationalism appears to still hold firm today. Both older and younger respondents presented nationalists as being outside the boundaries of the acceptable behaviour and often equated them with ‘Nazis’ or ‘racists’. This was in stark contrast to patriotism, which was defined as a far more positive trend by respondents across the board. The most succinct version of the difference between the two terms in one sentence was ‘*a nationalist is a person who is against everyone that is not russkii while a patriot is a person that is for Russia*’ (Sergei (40) Marketing Department, SPB). Whereas a ‘nationalist’ is aggressive and noisy, stirring

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<sup>78</sup> Following Soviet academic traditions and popular practice, this position is founded on understanding the word ‘nation’ (*natsiia*) as a synonym for ‘ethnic group’ (Pain 2004: 16)



up needless trouble, a patriot has different values such as ‘*honour, dignity and love toward the mother land (dostoinstvo, lyubov' k Rodine)*’ (Ilia (46) Import-Export Business owner, NN). Patriots are ‘good’ and ‘normal’ people that ‘*love the country*’ and ‘*all the inhabitants*’ rather than ‘*just one concrete national group (narod)*’. On the other hand, the ‘nationalist’ ‘*thinks all the good things should be reserved for their national group (natsiia) and the others should serve them*’ (Anton (52) ex-officer, small business owner, SPB).

The respondent below reproduces a similar dichotomy below by claiming nationalists want to debase or humiliate members of other ‘nations’ (*natsiia*), while trumpeting the merits of their own:

*The patriot cares/looks after (zabotitsya) about the interests of the country while the nationalist is one who would probably try and humiliate/degrade (unizit') the dignity of other countries and peoples. The concept of nationalism is more aggressive, while the idea of patriotism is more constructive, moderate and positive.*

Galina (40) Sociology department, NN

As we will see in the next chapter, views of patriots as ‘normal’ and nationalists as ‘abnormal’ ties in with how ordinary Russians have disengaged from politics and adopted a kind of conservative patriotism. This ‘moderate’ patriotism employs category constructions of Soviet origin. Patriotism is defined in terms of loyal and peaceful citizens using language that would not have contradicted late Soviet pamphlets on ‘Soviet patriotism and internationalism’ (Collias 2012; Bezrogov 2012).

Perhaps the most important link to make here is the focus shown in both Soviet and contemporary Russian patriotic education to the concept of homeland (*rodina*) (Bezrogov 2012: 113).<sup>79</sup> Respondents’ view of patriotism often boiled down to the simple precept that ‘the patriot loves his *rodina*’. The image of the good patriot seems to tie in with imagery of the ‘traditional’ family unit, one that loves and cares for one another; the good father, mother and loving

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<sup>79</sup>As Bezrogov (2012:122) has pointed out, running a society closed to the outside world, the Soviet state could not rely on class-based internationalist sentiment alone. It also needed a strong ‘patriotic’ element: love for the *rodina* – ‘Love, thus embodied in action, allowed the notion of the “homeland” to become the means of dissolving individual consciousness in the collective, enabling the regime to absorb the individual through the identification of personal interests and aims with the interests of the country.’

children. This ‘love of rodina’ patriotism suggests an ‘automatic relationship between motherland, kin and love (Markowitz 2000: 147). The continued dominance of Soviet-style definitions of patriotism helps explain some of the success of state-driven rhetoric on the need for all Russians to be good patriots. In 2016 President Putin went as far as to claim that patriotism is the only unifying idea that can exist in Russia today.<sup>80</sup>

In this research, the image of the calm and loyal patriot, who is conservative in outlook, stands in stark contrast to the radical, aggressive nationalist with messianic plans to reshape the nation. Thus, these patriotic values strongly support a non-ethnic vision of Russianness and helps promote the idea of a multinational, civic Russian nation. Here we find a link between being a *patriot* and being *ruskii*, as a ‘*patriot is a person that loves their country, her language*’ and loves ‘*all our writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoyevskii, Chekov and Bunin (...) our enormous incredible history (...) our nature*’ (Nadezhda (30) nanny, SPB). This ties in with the common tendency to connect Russianness to belonging to a linguistic and cultural space, and consciously deciding that you ‘feel Russian’: ‘*For me the meaning of ruskii, is not belonging to some family name such as Ivanov or Petrov, but about what you feel yourself to be from the inside*’ (Zakhar (29) Manager in export company, SPB). This rejects the idea that one cannot become *ruskii*, or that it is a fixed category.

Two styles of treating Russianness as an ‘open category’ were identified, one with very Soviet-influenced ideas, the other with a more ‘modern’ assimilationist and civic style. In the former, we find interesting reproductions of the category *ruskii* as it was understood in the Soviet period. Rather than seeing *ruskii* as an ethnic category, as Soviet nationality policy often treated it, many older respondents described how, as a category of practice, *ruskii* was something anybody could be. Thus, being *ruskii* is equated with loyalty and service to the state. An excellent demonstration of this sentiment can be seen below in an anecdote about Tsar Alexander III:

*The emperor held a large parade with lots of foreign dignitaries, it was all pomp and circumstance (...) as the regiments marched past one of the*

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<sup>80</sup> <https://lenta.ru/news/2016/02/03/putin/>

*ambassadors came over and asked the Tsar – ‘where are the russkie here?’ Alexander replied – ‘This detachment is made up of Bashkirs, here we have Byelorussians in the cavalry. But all of them together, all these nationalities, together in one place, these are the russkie’.*

**Andrei (51) Computer Programmer, SPB**

The setting is pre-Soviet, but, according to the respondent, the story was popularly retold in the late Soviet period. Another commonly presented idea was that, while the term ‘Soviet’ was officially used to describe those with Soviet passports, in practice, when meeting other foreigners, the tendency for all Soviet citizens, regardless of ethnicity, was to self-define as *russkii*. The prominent film director and public figure Stanislav Govorukhin retold this in an article on the meanings of Russianness: *‘In the USSR there was a term “Soviet people”. But inside the country nobody called themselves this and when they went abroad the following dialogue would occur: “Where are you from guys?” “from the USSR” “Ahh! Russians! Welcome!”’*<sup>81</sup>

The point here is that, while when we zoom in for detail we find different ethnic groups across Russia, upon zooming out we find the all the peoples of Russia essentially treated as part of the *russkii* category. As the respondent below indicates, when there is a common purpose, ‘we all become *russkie*’:

*Before there was the Soviet person, but then, after that, everyone was artificially divided into nationalities. It seems to me that rossiiyanin and russkii are artificial divisions. If it’s Russia then the term to use is russkii. If we take things in isolation, the small peoples (malie narodi), then an inhabitant of Mari El will call himself a Buryat. Well fine, if you are a Buryat then fine, you are a Buryat. But when we all get together, then we are all russkie, like in the train or when we have a drink.*

**Elisa (58) Director of Sports Centre, SPB**

The sense that ‘we all become *russkie*’ when there is a common cause is likely to be both a Soviet legacy and a typical mechanism of majority-group national identity. It essentially views Russianness as connected to working for the good of the country. Two interesting examples of how non-Russians could become

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<sup>81</sup> S. Govorukhin (2007) ‘Как нам не прогалдеть Россию’ <http://library.stu.ru/files/ros.pdf>

*russkii* involved two Americans, both of whom received publicity at the time (2014) for their desire to live in Russia and contribute to the country. The first was a cheese farmer working for twenty years on the outskirts of Moscow, who *‘even after all the sanctions started (...) kept his business, decided to stay, what a guy! ... so I think you are russkii if you work for the benefit of Russia and love Russia.* (Dmitri (28) Actor, SPB). The other example was the blogger turned Russia Today journalist Tim Kerby who *‘came here, speaks Russian poorly, but took Russian (russkoe) citizenship and wants to live here. For me he is russkii because he loves Russia and works for her.* (Leonid (45) Religious history lecturer, NN).

The above demonstrates how *russkii* is understood as a category of practice: it is when people living alongside one another interact in Russian language and follow commonly-accepted behaviours that people ‘feel Russian’. In this we find a link between older respondents presentation of a non-ethnic Russianness and the civic and modern version articulated by younger respondents. In defining Russianness, what is important for these respondents is integration into the Russian linguistic and cultural world, as well as holding citizenship. In the first instance you are *russkii* if *‘you speak Russian and somehow identify yourself with Russian culture and history’* regardless of *‘who your parents are or what kind of blood you have’* (Viktor (22) International Relations Student, NN). Here we also find citizenship equated with nationality; having a Russian passport you are free to consider yourself *‘russkii’* as *‘whoever considers themselves to be russkii, is a russkii. When a person makes the decision, and decides to be Russian then this happens and he immediately becomes Russian* (Sergei (40) Marketing Department, SPB).

While a large range of respondents embraced the latter concept of self-defining as Russian, many added additional clauses demanding deeper familiarity with Russia’s language and culture. It is at this point that definitions of Russianness become more prescriptive and narrow, in the sense that, to become *russkii*, one must absorb Russian culture and language and gain native familiarity with cultural symbols and products. In the example below the symbolic *matryeshka* doll is chosen as an object that should ‘feel native’ to a *russkii*:

*The main thing is to be brought up in the traditions of Russian (russkaya) culture, even if you weren't born here. If Russian (russkaya) culture is not alien to you, if it is in your blood, then you understand what a matryeshka is, not just because you saw it in a souvenir shop, but because for you it is a native thing for you, a russkie (russkie) thing. Russian (russkaya) nature, the Russian (russkie) wide-open spaces...*

Marina(29) Manager in Software Company, SPB

The above is a good example how even non-ethnic civic integrationist sentiment draws hard boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The demand to have 'Russian culture in your blood' and feel a 'native' connection to 'Russian things' links in, as we will see below, to how migrant workers are excluded. This version of commonality was popular and viewed Russian culture, language, history and traditions as forming a '*cultural background that influences all people*'. Thus, '*studying the same course books (...) going to the same kind of schools, being in the same space with the same kind of towns*' produces a certain unity of common belonging (Nadia, (26) Lecturer in Asian Studies, NN).

For some, this cultural linguistic version of Russianness is not something that can be learned in a few years: '*to be russkii you need to be brought up in Russian cultural traditions as it is only then you will know the culture, its uniqueness, the identity of the Russian people (russkii narod)*' (Katya (22) Student Politics, NN). This assimilationist sentiment makes serious demands on non-Russians (*nerusskie*) to work very hard to attain membership through cultural and linguistic adaptation. At times the requirements are so high it appears only the children of non-Russians have a realistic chance of integrating in such a manner: '*no person can understand Russia if they have not lived here long enough, and not absorbed some of the values that exist in all rossiyskii people, all russkie people*'. (Svetlana (25) Postgraduate researcher sociology, NN).

The way the respondent above conflates *rossiyanin* and *russkii* is an important point. In most versions we find a civic, non-ethnic and cultural linguistic understanding of being *russkii* in the vast majority of respondents of both age groups. The question raised by some respondents then, was why are both *russkii* and *rossiyanin* needed? Some held the view that *rossiyanin* and *russkii*

artificially divide a larger group up, despite their common traits: *‘the word “rossiyanin” suggests that some people are “russkie” and others not very “russkie” but when you just call everyone “russkie” without any scrutiny, that is more humane.’* (Pyotr (29) Architect, NN). Again we return to the idea *russkii* should not be used as a marker of ethnicity but to describe citizens of Russia and members of the Russian linguistic and cultural space. Here we find a desire to change the meaning of a category in order to redraw boundaries in a more inclusive manner:

*I don’t think the difference in meanings between rossiyanin and russkii is very healthy. Because the word ‘russkii’ should mean a citizen of Russia but in reality it is not so. Actually, for many russkii is used to describe ethnic Russians. But it would be better if we all, regardless of ethnicity, just called ourselves ‘russkie’.*

Semyon (54) psychologist, SPB

In essence, many respondents view *rossiyanin* and *russkii* as having similar meaning and, the former may be jettisoned, and *russkii* left to describe peoples of various ethnicity united into a ‘nation’ with a common language, culture, shared history and territory:

*We need to slightly change the meaning of the word ‘russkii’. We should equate it with the word “rossiyanin”. Being russkii is not because you have Russian blood, because we don’t have many of these “pure-blood” russkie around here. Everyone is half-something. So one just needs to decide for themselves what “russkii” means.*

Yaroslav (23), IT Student and small businessman, NN

Thus, there is an interesting continuity in defining Russianness that may be transmitted from the older Soviet-born respondents to the younger cohort. While abstract terminology exists to differentiate between ‘ethnic’ Russianness and Citizenship in both eras (*sovetskii* and *russkii* in the USSR, *rossiyskii* and *russkii* today), the strong tendency to merge a variety of ethnic groups into the *russkie* category appears to hold true for many living in the Russian Federation today. A common thread linking old and young is that the *russkie* are a non-

ethnic cultural and linguistic category into which all other ethnic groups can (or should) merge. There is more than a Soviet tinge to this; at the core of Soviet nationality policy was the concept of various ethnic groups converging (*sblizhenie*) into one Soviet people (*sovietskii narod*). The respondent below suggests the shared history, culture and language of the peoples of Russia makes them all *russkie* and, as long as they integrate and assimilate around these poles, ‘we are all *ruskie*.’

*I don't know, in university there were people from Buryatia and we got on fine. It isn't a problem. They are still inhabitants of Russia, they are ruskie. They live with us (u nas) and this is a multi-ethnic (mnogonatsional'naya) country, this is fine, and we can exist this way. For me these are people not from without but within my culture. Yes it is diverse and multifaceted, but it is all the same our culture.*

**Marina (29) Manager in Software Company, SPB**

The desire to merge these two terms, then, is not based on ideas of ethno-nationalism but does connect with the goals of creating a unified civic nation based on common citizenship, language, culture and shared values. Here the term *ruskii* offers more potential in ‘unifying people’, as long as its ethno-national flavour is clearly rejected.

On the other hand, we can find some divergence between older and younger respondents in what criteria must be met to become *ruskii*. Younger respondents made more tough demands in terms of assimilation than older respondents, who were far looser and associating Russianness more as self-defining and working for the good of the country. This is a split that will be returned below when considering attitudes to migrant workers. This division should not be overplayed; above we have seen how many respondents across the board share similar positions on certain points: indifference to being *rossiyanin*, rejecting nationalism in favour of a conservative patriotism, deeper connection to being *ruskii* but on non-ethnic grounds, and receptivity to redefining *ruskii/rossiyanin*. Beyond this, we find an important set of myths in circulation that encourage enthusiasm and optimism for Russia as a multinational country.

### *Support for multinationalism and visions of interethnic harmony*

Another key finding was that, despite literature on increasing xenophobia in Russia in the 2000's (Gudkov 2002; Pain 2004, 2007), the vast majority of respondents in this research supported the idea that Russia is and should be a multinational country (*mnogonatsional'naya strana*) and a common home for different national groups (*narodov*). This appears to be a default position among respondents young and old, and is based on the common-sense view that '*nationalism is simply not acceptable as a matter of principle*' given that '*Russia is a very multicultural country (mul'tikul'turnaya strana)*' in which '*thousands of peoples (tysyacha narodov) have lived and closely interacted (vzaimodeystvuyut) for many centuries*' (Boris (25) TV/radio presenter, SPB). A number of positive references were made across a range of respondents to the *malie narodi* (particularly Tatarstan, Bashkiria and Yakutia) as 'native' (*korenie*) to Russia. These peoples were presented as organic and home-grown (*korenie*), having lived compactly alongside the *russkie* for centuries. Rather than being a threat, '*the various peoples of Russia have been pretty complementary to the russkie, I mean they have really got on well with us for hundreds of years (...) there is harmony*' (Viktor (22) International Relations Student, NN). Respondents could report on their own observations of how, for example, Russians and Tatars interact in the present day: '*we have a village in our region that is half Russian, half Tatar. There is a significant difference between the two groups. You can see it, but all the same they live together. There is no enmity between them*' (Iliia (46) Import-Export Business owner, NN). In the above examples, we find interethnic groups imagined as peacefully interacting and the interaction is positive for the *russkie*.

When we turn to how the *russkie* were imagined in this interethnic family, some traces of hierarchy emerged. The Russians are at the top, leading the family, while the smaller nationalities are content playing their part. This is a harmonious family unit that is imagined through history to the present day:

*Russia was formed from many peoples (narodami). Of course the Russian people (russkii narod) has been prevalent (prevaliroval) and has led the others with her, it is more intellectual and industrious, that is how things have worked out. But the other peoples (narodi) are by no means worse, we*



*won the war together, all fifteen republics took part, Jews, Azeri, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Georgians! We have always been multinational (mnogonatsional'nyimi)*

Oleg (49) Construction site foreman, SPB

The view above is founded on a set of narratives on the peaceful absorption of *malie narodi* into a common space, a process that is led by the Russians. Here we find powerful myths suggesting these peoples were not oppressed by the central authorities but happily incorporated into Russia's rich multi-ethnic tapestry. These discursive frames are important in explaining today's world and shoring up the 'normality' of Russia as a multinational state. A common myth in circulation presents Russia's multi-ethnic traditions as more peaceful and kind-hearted than the other imperial expansions of the age. Russia's 'peaceful' empire building on the Eurasian space was contrasted to the brutal colonisation methods of the Western powers, with frequent references to the Spanish, English or, later, American treatment of native tribes.

*I think we brought writing, the alphabet to many people. After all, peoples of the North didn't have anything up to the Soviet period, we founded this for them, and we established their language, in contrast to the Americans who exterminated the native Indian population. Why are they not held to account in this world?*

Igor, (41) Lecturer in International Relations, NN

The idea of 'respect' is highlighted below, in what represents a denial of Russia's colonialism in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Instead of 'colonization', 'occupation' or 'exploitation' we find 'absorption' on terms of 'respect', with the newly absorbed peoples becoming 'equal' to the *russkie*: *'the question of respect is important. We have never founded colonies for ourselves, we absorbed peoples (natsiy) and these peoples (natsiy) became equal to us'* (Vladislav (28) Postdoctoral researcher Middle Eastern Studies, NN).

Another aspect of this narrative is that the Russians went out and harnessed wild tundra wastelands, won over primitive tribes with soft policies of integration. The Russians are portrayed as harbingers of progress, civilization,

industrialisation and modernity. Again below we find hierarchies on display, the Russians who lead, build, organize and the ‘natives’ who either ‘learn’ how to follow or remain ‘backward’:

*We came and gave education to them, built towns and, if it wasn't for us, they would still be tending to flocks of deer. I don't think we were in any way 'occupiers'. Everything was different. Men set off across the kilometres, passing tundra, with the wind at their faces, and the cold. They marched on without seeing anyone for thousands of kilometres, stuck a flag in the ground and that is how it was declared Russian territory. As for the locals, well some of them wanted to study, the others to stay with the deer.*

**Mikhail (29) Actor, Moscow**

In these narratives of Russia's ‘natural’ and ‘peaceful’ expansion’ we find little reference to colonialism or imperialism to characterise the way Russians and non-Russians interacted. The imperial and Soviet past is presented as ‘normal’ and, therefore, not something in need of critique. By focusing on the positive aspects of the imperial and Soviet experience, these narratives support the image of Russia as a benevolent force in the Eurasian space.

The above is reinforced by popular views of the USSR as a ‘kind’ internationalist society. Positive representations of the Soviet policy of *druzhba narodov* abounded in young and old. Here, the consensus was that *druzhba narodov* was a reality in the USSR, not just a propaganda construct. Older respondents consistently claimed they felt no difference among national groups and that ethnicity was of no importance. This sheds light on how Russians understood the ‘Friendship of Nations’ as a space where ethnicity was irrelevant:

*In the period we lived there was a real friendship of nations... In school we studied alongside all kinds of nationalities, we didn't see any difference between nationalities. I didn't care about it at all. (Pause) Everyone was friendly with one another. In our courtyard, I don't know, it was like we were all the same.*

**Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB**

There is little evidence respondents thought ‘non-Russians’ may have experienced things differently. Speaking for the majority, older respondents offer positive recollections: ‘*people around me did not worry about nationality (...) we didn’t pay attention to this issue (...) and we all lived peacefully together as a multi-ethnic country*’ (Yegor (44) Newspaper editor, NN). This resonates with the discussions on the non-ethnic character of Russianness earlier in the chapter and suggests the relevance of Soviet traditions to such sentiment. Older respondents argued that this was definitely one part of Soviet ideology that people believed in and, as a result, functioned well.

Indeed, respondents offer very few negative representations of how interethnic relations were handled either by the Russian Empire or the USSR. Furthermore, there was little open discussion of the role of the ‘*russkie*’ in either period. Overall, the *russkie* play a leading role as ‘elder brother’ in popular understandings of Russia’s multi-ethnic past, but, in keeping with Soviet tradition, this is not something that is carefully articulated and justified, but understood as the ‘way things have always been.’ At the same time, we find little appreciation of how things were for non-Russians in these arrangements, beyond the sentiment that they are generally happy with their status in Russia. Above all, the image of how the *russkie* and the *malie narodi* interact was one of harmony and agreement. As we shall see below, in contrast to the rosy picture of the past, there is criticism of certain current tendencies in the Russian Federation today. In the next part of this chapter, I examine how this picture of interethnic harmony between Russians and non-Russians breaks down.

## **Part two: Exclusivist sentiment: out-group mechanisms**

One interesting point emerging from discussions on the multi-ethnic character of the Russian Federation, was to find support for multinationalism existing alongside anti-migrant or anti-Caucasus feeling. This suggests support for Russia as a *mnogonatsional’naya strana* may be disconnected from tolerance or openness toward non-Russian migration, which may exist in a different mental compartment. In examining this ‘othering’ sentiment, we turn first to portrayals of people from the North Caucasus, who were subject to a variety of

‘groupist’ interpretations among respondents, who marked them out as an ethno-cultural ‘Other’.

### *The North Caucasus issue*

Made up of eight regions, including the Republic of Dagestan and Chechnya, the North Caucasus stands out as a region exposing certain fault lines in support for *mnogonatsional’naya Rossiya*. Those from the North Caucasus, unlike the other *korennye narodi* of Russia such as the Tartars, Bashkirs or Yakuts, face a certain anti-Caucasus sentiment that has deep Russian imperial and Soviet legacies. This is especially true in attitudes to the Chechens, who suffer from a negative image as a tough mountain people who, among their neighbours, are ‘the most aggressive and uncompromisingly hostile to Russian rule’ (Russell 2005: 103). During the nineties, the explosion of separatist conflict in Chechnya and the arrival of new Caucasian migrants to Russian cities caused anti-Caucasus sentiment to ripple across Russian society (Trenin and Malashenko, 2004: 61). It appears such sentiment has not dissipated. In recent sociological polling with the open question ‘which groups of people provoke negative feelings’, *kavkaztsy* (Caucasians) were in third place (8.4%) behind the homeless (*BOMZH*) (9.5%) and skinheads (11.4%), with alcoholics following behind them (7.4%) (Tishkov 2013: 361).

In this section we explore how attitudes to the North Caucasus reveal much about how Russian ‘we’ is constructed; *kavkaztsy* do not fit with the template of other ‘good’ or ‘normal’ peoples in the Russian Federation. This is due to their unacceptable behaviour, their alien and wild culture and the fact that the region is an undesirable drain on Russia’s resources. Firstly, it is worth noting that respondents treated *kavkaztsy* in a very different manner from the other *malie narodi* above, even though, like Tatars and Bashkirs, they are fully-fledged citizens of Russia and hold Russian passports. In doing this, one common line was to highlight their ‘rudeness’ and ‘disrespect’ (*naglost*); their behaviour was seen to be ‘cheeky’ or ‘aggressive’ and demonstrated an unwillingness to ‘play by our rules’. The peoples of the North Caucasus, the Chechens in particular, were seen to have ‘a totally different way of thinking and behaving’, doing things here in Russia ‘they would never do back home’

(Nikolay (52), ex-policeman, retired, SPB).

As we will see later, this theme of cultural aliens not ‘fitting in’ to local norms emerges again in the section on migrants, where there is a sense many respondents do not differentiate the *kavkaztsy* from migrant workers. The behaviour of ‘these people’ does not fit with how a ‘normal’ migrant or foreigner should act: the hostility and wilful independence of the *kavkaztsy* is taken as a threat and subverts existing ethnic hierarchies within the contemporary ‘friendship of nations’. As a group, the *kavkaztsy* are imagined to violate or resist the accepted order and respondents, in turn, demand an end to this. Here the threat is not put in tangible terms of crime or socio-economic competition, but in terms of their negative behaviour.

This brings us to a second main theme, that the *kavkaztsy* are culturally backward or incompatible with Russian culture. This is reinforced by stereotypical images of cultural differences that echo long-standing images in Russian literature. In rendering *kavkaztsy* as a culturally alien and warlike people who ‘have a different way of seeing the world’ we find common use of certain stereotypes and social categorizations. One common image was to present them as ‘*people from the mountains (...) who have different ways from us. (...) they are not overburdened by education (...) they shoot guns into the air and that is considered normal there*’ (Anton (52) ex-officer, small business owner, SPB). There are also common schemas employed to summarise this ‘lower cultural level’, for example, ‘*they fire guns into the air and don’t care that its not allowed*’ (which shows them to be wild, hot-blooded and disrespectful) or ‘*they still kidnap women for wedding traditions and this is barbaric*’ (which shows their culture to be backward) (Pyotr (29) Architect, NN). These kinds of representations were reproduced across respondents, even those with ‘liberal’ inclinations. The respondent below argues the region stands out from the rest of the Russian Federation due to its ‘barbaric culture’ that means ‘*no matter what they do there, it ends up with death and violence*’, something connected to the fact that ‘*several generations have grown up there who are very military-style people, who have known nothing but war in their lives*’ (Julia (25) Human rights activist, Moscow). A diverse range of respondents reproduced these negative stereotypes and there was little sign of any more positive alternative

visions of the *kavkaztsy*.

A third factor in ‘othering’ the North Caucasus was to imagine it as a region sucking up money: ‘*The worst thing is that it is a subject of the Russian Federation with the same rights as the rest but with a much smaller population that is receiving very large subsidies*’ (Pyotr (29) Architect, NN). Here the Russian verb *kormit* (literal translation ‘feed’) was used extensively to describe the subsidies and maintenance payments paid by the Federal Centre to the North Caucasus. Here the ‘insolence’ of the *kavkaztsy* is due to their demands for money from ‘our pockets’. The respondent below appears to merge migrants and *kavkaztsy* into one category:

*Now migrants really bother us and have ruined what is called ‘friendship of nations’ today. (...) in the USSR the Caucasus was never so brazen. Now everyone understands that enormous funding is sent there. This is money from our pockets. And they are so cheeky, they demand more and more. So that is definitely a negative.*

Julia (47) Assistant in film set production, SPB

Thus, the *kavkaztsy* deviate from ‘normal’ behaviour within the ‘friendship of nations’ due to their ‘insolence’ – which is partly about their independent and demanding stances. A significant minority of respondents cutting across age and social lines took up this critical position, demanding that ‘our tax money should not be sent to them’ as ‘we owe them nothing’. Here we find more evidence of how boundaries are redrawn: Russia, or in other words, ‘we’, send money to ‘them’ - the North Caucasus. There is a clear sense the region is thus excluded from the imagined Russian nation and boundaries are reconfigured to exclude the *kavkaztsy*. For some of these respondents, the answer to the problem was to cut off the flow of Federal money flowing south and let the North Caucasus break away from the Russian Federation. This raises the question as to why so much money should be given to a region that is not seen to be part of the Russian ‘we’.

This brings us to the final theme in representations of the Caucasus. Somewhat paradoxically, the majority position among respondents across the board was to

support the current *status quo* and keep things as they are. What is interesting is how arguments in favour of the North Caucasus rarely referred to any ‘Friendship of Nations’ or adherence to the principle of Russia as a multi-ethnic state. Instead, the common-sense understanding of the current state of affairs between the Federal Centre and the region is ‘*the money sent out there is a pay-off (podkup) to the local fighters there, to stop them from turning the place into a slaughterhouse.*’ Marina (29) Manager in Software Company, SPB. A message that cut across all respondents was the need to contain ‘*a dangerous region with a dangerous people (opasnii narod)*’ (Zakhar (29) Manager in export company, SPB).

Even among respondents who lamented the loss of ‘*our resources*’ that should be spent on ‘*our population*’, we could still find support for keeping the North Caucasus: ‘*the subsidies are in a political sense probably an inevitable measure, if we want peace on the borders, we will have to give something for this*’ (Galina (40) Sociology department, NN). In this sense, differentiation of regions into ‘ours’ and ‘not-ours’ has occurred but support for retaining the territory remains, which is justified on the lines of state security. Thus, the North Caucasus is presented as a space that must be quarantined in order to contain violent, terroristic, separatist and even criminal elements. Sending money to this zone helps neutralise it and keep things ‘*spokoino*’ as ‘*If we don’t keep things in order in the Caucasus those blacks won’t let us live (nam zhizni eti chernyye ne dadut)*’.<sup>82</sup> However, as long as ‘*There is money for everyone there (Tam vsem nikakikh deneg ne zhalko)* (...) *there is peace, calm among people, development.... And all this is worth it*’ (Ludmilla (50) Head of University Dormitory, NN).

This desire to quarantine the region for security reasons, tended to imagine the region as a ‘peripheral zone’ on Russia’s southern frontier where peace, security and stability must be achieved. The important point here is that, if this peace is disturbed or order collapses on the frontier, the consequences for Russia itself could be disastrous. This sentiment connects the retention of territory with securing peace and stability. Below the process of gathering these territories is presented as progressive (increasing security), while losing

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<sup>82</sup> The term *cherniye* (blacks) is a derogatory term used to describe people from the south, especially the Caucasus. Its use underwent a marked increase during the 1990’s (Russell 2005: 106).

territory is regressive (reducing security). Thus, even if these lands are filled with people that are not ‘ours’, it is ‘our’ territory and vital to creating a buffer zone around the core Russian lands. According to this version, loss of these territorial frontier zones could cause Russia itself to break up:

*If we gave Siberia to the Chinese or Karelia to the Finns, this would be like a reversal of history, all the country would be divided into regions, into little kingdoms, who would then fight among themselves (....) the buffer space we have today holds Russia in a condition of peace (uderzhivayet Rossiyu v sostoyanii mira)*

Daria (28) Events Manager for Local Government, SPB

Thus, respondents reproduced a popular domino theory that applies to post-Soviet Russia. This way of thinking treats claims to national self-determination and separatism as a genie that, once released, cannot be restrained, and could even lead to the collapse of the Russian Federation. Here the respondent clearly underlines that, even though his gut feeling is to let the North Caucasus secede, his head tells us this is not in the ‘interests of the state’:

*I can say in the nineties one position was strong: just put a fence up there (in the Caucasus MB) and remove them, let them live as they please. On the other hand, you have to understand if you let one (national group MB) do this, then the others will start making noises (shurshaniye). It’s like the domino principle. So you need to operate here not according to emotions, you can’t just follow the feeling ‘let them all go to hell.’*

Evgeny (30) sales manager construction materials, SPB

In part, this suggests a continuation with previous polling that suggested up to half of Russians believed the Second Chechen War was fought to prevent the collapse of Russia as a country, while three quarters believed it was mainly to combat banditry (Trenin and Malashenko, 2004: 51). Indeed, there was the sense among respondents that, in spite of much talk of Russia’s size, strength and power in modern discourse, many respondents keenly feel the country’s internal weakness: ‘if you take one part away then the whole thing will fall apart’ (Sasha (28), University Lecturer in History, SPB). The fear of a 1991-style unravelling underpins support for the current *status quo*, even if this seems to suggest the



essential fragility of the current arrangements and doubts the Russian state's capacity to survive the 'stress test' of losing certain territories.

Some older respondents explicitly framed their conservatism towards territorial change in reference to what happened in the 1991 breakup. Once again we find the salience of life experience guiding the older generation and influencing the general mood. Here they remembered how slogans of separatism and secession promised a better life but, in reality, *'after separation we did not go on to live any better. (...) That was a trick (obmanka), a kind of formula that allowed the disintegration of the country.'* (Leonid (45) Religious history lecturer, NN). One clear connection was to link secession to chaos and violence, given the past and present examples, the respondent suggests it is better to leave things be and let the Federal Centre decide redistribution questions as they see fit: *'Ukraine is a very clear example. Look what happened in the Donbass, things fell apart and it is all dog eat dog there (kak pauki v banke). The same thing would happen here if we started to separate some regions'* (Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB).

The above offers evidence that memory of recent lived history acts as an important driver in the adoption of statist and security discursive frames. It is this point, rather than any narrative of the *kavkaztsy* as 'one of us', a 'brother people' or another *malie narodi*, that ultimately unites respondents behind keeping the North Caucasus in the Russian Federation. Memories of recent history (1991 collapse, the Chechen Wars) help explain the focus on geopolitics, state security and national interest, as well as imagining Russia as a giant but fragile state with many national groups that must be held together in a stable unit. All the same, for many the North Caucasus and *kavkaztsy* are a threatening and undesirable 'other' of the Russian 'we', a source of anger, resentment and shame. It is worth noting, however, that this popular 'Caucasophobia' is not connected to a wider islamophobia that we might observe in Western Europe. Instead, a large part is based on negative stereotypes, schemas and categories available in everyday life, both on the street and in the media.

## *Migration*

The increased presence of migrant workers from surrounding CIS countries has been an important aspect of social change in much of Russia's urban spaces since 1991. In the 1990's almost five million migrants entered Russia, although when we consider the total number of migrants as a percentage of the population, this was only 8.7% in 2010.<sup>83</sup> At the time of interviews, according to the Federal Migration Service, 11.5 million foreign citizens were present in Russia by 2014, of which, only 1.5 million were working on a legal basis.<sup>84</sup> Thus, Russia's post-1991 demographic decline appears only to have been arrested by the migrant influx. As much as 98% of the population growth registered in Russia for 2016 came from migrants.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, there is significant ambiguity to the integration of migrant workers in Russia, with state policies ranging from inclusivist integration policies to mass expulsions of migrants. Hutchings and Tolz (2016: 328) also discovered ambiguity in media coverage of the issue, as state media is 'caught between (a) attempting to preserve ethnic cohesion by under-reporting inflammatory topics and (b) acceding to popular sentiments by echoing the prejudicial fears to which those topics gave rise'. This ambiguity is also visible in popular sentiment, with similar proportions of the population (53.3%) agreeing migrant workers are a 'necessity' in Russia, and 42.5% supporting the idea that migrants should be sent back to their countries of origin.<sup>86</sup>

Commenting on this 'absence of a stable public consensus', Kosmarskaya and Savin (2016: 156-9) noted how, among their own respondents, 'pragmatism' on the demographic need for migrants coexisted with the 'emotionally coloured' desire 'not to let them in'. A similar split in attitudes was found among respondents in this research. While some clearly wanted to exclude migrant workers from the Russian 'we', another large segment was more sympathetic to migrants and receptive to their integration into Russian society. It is worth noting that there is some correlation between this split on migrants and definitions on Russianness among older and younger respondents. In this

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<sup>83</sup> This ranks Russia in 25<sup>th</sup> place behind the leaders – Israel (40%), Australia (26%) and Switzerland (23%)  
<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Myths-and-Realities--16059>

<sup>84</sup> 'Nelegal'naya migratsiya v Rossii', ITAR TASS, 17 October 2014: <http://tass.ru/info/691935>

<sup>85</sup> The 267,300 increase in population was measured in Jan 1 2017, of which 98% were migrants according to Rosstat, 22 Feb 2017:  
<https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2017/02/22/678807-naselenie-viroslo>

<sup>86</sup> Data from 2013 NEORUSS research project in Kolsto, Blakkisrud (2016).

research there was a rough three-way split on migration between: (i) those adhering to Soviet-style inclusivist visions of Russianness who tended to be more open to migrants; (ii) those holding civic assimilationist views on Russianness who had more demanding stances toward migrants; (iii) those taking more hostile stances to migrant workers, using groupist language that focused on ethno-cultural difference.

The first group of respondents had markedly more positive stances toward migrants and generally tended to be made up of older respondents. On the one hand, this is a logical extension of the Soviet influenced view that, to become *ruskii*, what is needed is to be ‘patriotic’ and work for the good of the country. Here the focus is not on ethno-cultural difference, which is downplayed, but on the social status of the migrant. What is emphasised is that migrants have come to ‘*work and not live on hand-outs*’. They do the ‘*dirtiest jobs, those that local people won’t do*’ and, therefore, *we need to view them with understanding, give them permission to work, temporary right to live here. (...) without them we won’t make it, no way.* (Anton (52) ex-officer, small business owner, SPB). According to this view, migrants come to Russia to improve their lot and work really hard; this kind of behaviour and attitude is something with which these respondents can positively identify. Older respondents also revealed idealistic sentiments that seem to emerge from Soviet-inspired imagery. One supervisor at a construction site was certain interethnic harmony was still a real thing declaring: ‘*I think the Friendship of Nations has still remained from the Soviet period. It is in the blood of the ruskii person to get along well with all the rest*’ (Oleg (49) Construction site foreman, SPB). There is still a sense among many in the last Soviet generation that the peoples of the former USSR are of common origin and have a shared history and, therefore, there simply cannot be hostile feelings between them:

*Two weeks ago a women in Uzbekistan died who, as it turned out, adopted 150 children from here during the Leningrad Blockade. She brought up 150 evacuated children in Uzbekistan. How can I tell her that her own sons who have come to work should just get the hell out of here? That would be impossible. You need to remember when things were bad for us they helped and now, things are bad for them so let them work.*

Kirill (40) ex- Stock Broker and political activist, SPB

While Soviet internationalist sentiment is important, we must also recognise the importance of everyday encounters in attitudes to migrants. One important theme in this group of respondents was references to positive interactions with migrants. This offers evidence supporting the ‘social contact hypothesis’, as respondents in this group did not see migrants or *nerusskie* as a problem in their everyday life and tended to have some positive experience of them on a one-to-one basis:

*I think that now we need to take it case by case. If a person has come to work and live here, it brings a benefit. Like for example here in the dormitory we have Tajiks who came here as a couple, started working, then their kids came and they have received citizenship, they work. Their kid has gone to serve in our army even. These kinds of people have the right to stay.*

**Ludmilla (50) Head of University Dormitory, NN**

Here we find another example, a retired miner who has employed Tajik labourers to work on his dacha. With closer interaction and real experience comes a different image of the migrants, whom he sees as people who have come to work and get on in life, people with whom he can identify, those who behave themselves ‘well’ and ‘normally’.

*Here the Tajiks can do things they can't do back home like walk around safely, go to good shops, smoke, drink. But we haven't had any trouble here. There are lots of them here, practically whole village was built by citizens of Tajikistan. But they have never started any fights or stolen anything. They just come and work and what is most surprising is they study Russian and know it well, even the young lads.*

**Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB**

This sentiment of the ‘well-behaved’ migrant who speaks Russian is also important for the next group of respondents, most of whom were younger and subscribed to more ‘civic’ versions of Russianness. Here we find a practical consequence of defining Russianness in terms of culture and language: the demand for assimilation and the stigmatization of those non-Russians unable or unwilling to accomplish this. Here attitudes to migrants were conditional on readiness to accept ‘our culture’, ‘our traditions’. These respondents claimed it

was the responsibility of migrants to learn ‘*some rules*’, to ‘*learn Russian and become familiar with the cultural specifics*’, rather than ‘*behaving incorrectly and insultingly*’ (Elena (29) Accountant, Dzershinsk, NN) and not the other way around. This assimilationist position on migrants takes the line that, in order to achieve integration, the migrant must accept local values, absorb Russian culture. One common point of reference here was to the Russian proverb ‘Do not go into someone else’s monastery with your own rules’, which functions as a kind of cultural idiom that is internalised and passed around: ‘*You are entering another’s home, you are a guest, you must get acclimatised, understand, not destroy, but they come here with their own rules and don’t want to respect ours.*’ (Dmitri (28) Actor, SPB) These migrants, in failing to learn and follow ‘the rules’ do not become *russkii*. This ties in with the popular understanding of Russianness as being about the acceptance of culture, language and values:

*If you come with your own set of rules and try and enforce them here, then you are not russkii, you have come to Russia but have remained, say, a Tajik. It is the effort to absorb and pass on this Russian culture that makes you russkii.*

Marina (29) Manager in Software Company, SPB

Turning to the final group of respondents, who were the most hostile to migrants, we find three main lines of objection, some of which is similar to representations of people from the North Caucasus. Firstly, we find the idea of migrants having a ‘lower culture’ that form a ‘wild’ or ‘dangerous’ element in Russian cities and seek to ‘force their ways upon us’. Such a position, as we see below, need not entail abandonment of the principle that Russia is a multinational state. In the extract below the respondent speaks in a way that merges the people of the North Caucasus (people from the mountains) with other migrants (*priyezzhiye*):

*Of course, Russia is a common home for many nationalities, I have always thought that and probably always will. But I don’t like it when they come down from the mountains (s gor spuskayutsya) and start imposing their own ways. I mean like trying to spread their traditions into Russian culture. Yes, in Russia national groups have always lived more or less peacefully but*

*when migrants (priyeczhiye) here unite into their own enclaves and start 'terrorizing' the native population («terrorizirovat'» korennoye naseleniye)... well that is what causes confrontations.*

**Denis (41) Journalist, NN**

Here we find the idea of a culturally alien 'Other' that 'descends' upon 'civilized' urban spaces and threaten the locals. This is an emotional anti-migrant discourse that points to cultural backwardness and inappropriate behaviour among new arrivals to cities when drawing lines of exclusion on cultural lines. This is a narrative common to other parts of the post-Soviet space, such as Bishkek, where researchers found new lines of exclusion and inclusion being drawn along lines of newly arrived rural migrants and more established Russian-speaking urban dwellers (Flynn, Kosmarskaya 2012, 2014). Part of this hostility is based on the idea that these 'Eastern' ethno-cultural groups are harbingers of a lower culture who have arrived uninvited en-masse to 'European' Russian cities. Below, the respondent suggests that St. Petersburg, which she sees as a city of high culture, is being swamped by the people of the Central Asian 'auls'. The respondent connects this to general trends occurring across Europe and firmly associates Russia in this context with 'other European countries':

*I think a visa regime would help because soon we will end up with auls here. And, as a person of culture, this really worries me. (...). Our incredible Petersburg culture is starting to deteriorate (portit'sya). But this is happening all over Europe. People come with their culture and they don't integrate into your European one, they do not accept your culture. They live on their own. Here the same thing is happening unfortunately.*

**Julia (47) Assistant in film set production, SPB**

The sense of an 'Eastern invasion' presents migrants as a threat to urban spaces in as far as their 'alien' external attributes intrude on 'our' space and impose themselves on 'our' cities. This was less a reference to race as such; rather the focus was on cultural objects (scarves, clothes) and practices (praying, gathering in street):

*They travel with their own samovars, with their own traditions and*

*religions. In Petersburg and Moscow they have already started to overflow the metro stations and streets when they have their own special kinds of holidays. But I think this shouldn't happen in our towns. In Tatarstan or Dagestan, where the principal religion is Islam, that is fine, but not here.*

Elena (29) Accountant, Dzershinsk, NN

The negative images produced above of migrants as ethno-cultural aliens are reinforced by negative everyday experiences related by these respondents. Thus, rather than understanding this xenophobic sentiment as a shift to nationalism or rejection of multinationalism, we can find evidence it is more a response to what they perceive of as significant visible changes in the habitat and lifestyle to which they are accustomed. This brings us back to the 'social contact hypothesis', as respondents in this group usually had limited experience of any deeper interaction with migrants and, as a result, tended to experience displeasure at the point of contact. This everyday contact served only to activate certain negative schemas and stereotypes that described the perceived differences between 'us' and 'them' in terms of culture, manners, traditions and language. The first example shows how unpleasant feelings emerge after witnessing migrants enjoying common urban spaces in public holidays or weekends:

*If you go out on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December, I mean God forbid you do end up on the street at New Year, especially Palace Square, it is all migrants there, some of whom have been let off work and you see them all and realise how many there are in our town. Because up until then they work in their bunkhouses at the construction sites and we don't see them in the centre.*

Sasha (28), University Lecturer in History, SPB

Again, it appears to be limited contact that breeds antipathy to migrants. A second example concerns a male respondent who resents the presence of a migration registration centre near his home. He accuses the migrants of not 'playing by our rules', of behaving in outrageous ways they would never get away with in their home countries. Again the theme of 'behaving rudely' (*vesti sebya po-khamski*) returns as it did with regards the North Caucasus, and migrants are clearly presented as a danger.

*My parents live close to the Unified Centre of Documents near Smolny where there are millions of migrants (gastarbayterov)! My 16-year old sister is afraid to walk past it. I have to accompany her or, otherwise, if she walks alone they all start catcalling her, whistling and behaving in an utterly vile way (vesti sebya absolyutno po-khamski). That is acceptable for them. But of course they don't behave that way with their own women but here they permit themselves this kind of behaviour because it seems they don't have to take responsibility for it.*

**Alexander (25) Business development manager, SPB**

The sense of 'abnormality' in this picture is clear. Here, migrants are an 'Other' that behaves in an utterly deviant fashion. This brings us to the important dynamic of 'normality' operating across all three groups of respondents. The image of the ideal migrant and desirable interethnic relations is commonly taken from Soviet frames of reference. In some ways this explains the tendency to combine 'multinationalism' with the idea 'all peoples should stay in their homelands'. This duality was present in Soviet Nationalities policy and seems to still leave strong traces today. Below, we find a good example of this tendency of combining support for a multi-ethnic country with a preference for restricting 'ethnic mixing' among the peoples:

*Russia is a pretty unique country (...) during the internal colonisation of Eurasia (...) a very large amount of nationalities were accumulated (...) On the one hand, we are all inhabitants of one country and have one citizenship, but on the other hand, we have great diversity. But I also think everyone should live on their own land. (...) together we are inhabitants of one huge country, on the other hand, I don't think we should mix everything up.*

**Evgeny (30) sales manager construction materials, SPB**

The above combines Russian multinationalism (a continuation of Soviet internationalism) with indigenization (Soviet *korenizatsia* encouraging separate homelands for each national group). Perhaps this explains how respondents could comfortably combine xenophobia toward newcomers to urban spaces - some of whom may have come from within the Russian Federation - with



support for the idea of Russia as a harmonic multinational country. One respondent, who was otherwise an enthusiastic proponent of multinationalism, viewed the large concentration of migrants in Russian cities as evidence of ‘*a special policy to mix the Slavic population with other ethnic groups*’, a trend opposed by the respondent on the grounds ‘*nothing good will come of making Russia into a kind of composite solyanka<sup>87</sup> with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.*’ (Alexander (25) Business development manager, SPB). Another respondent made a distinct division between ‘native Russian peoples’ (*korenje rossiiskie narodi*) and ‘migrants’ to explain her own understanding of the situation:

*The definition of Russia as a multi-ethnic country in our constitution alludes to the fact that many peoples (natsiy) live here. I think Russia should be a state only for those peoples (narodov) that are native (korenje) rossiyskie peoples like the Tatars or those living in the far north. But Russia should not be a home for peoples such as the Tajiks and all those immigrants that we have.*

Ksenia (22) Law student, NN

Thus, desires for a diverse multi-ethnic country where most people stay in their own land may be about a return to Soviet ‘normality’. One position held by a wide range of respondents was that the current situation with regards migration and interethnic relations is far worse than that of the late Soviet period. The claim that things were ‘better in the USSR’ reflects the idea that mass migration is a new kind of phenomenon that did not exist in the USSR as ‘*back then we didn’t have all this mixing. Every people lived in their own republic, it wasn’t like now*’ (Anton (52) ex-officer, small business owner, SPB). Very few respondents argued *druzhba narodov* continued fully intact today and many claimed they now lived in an atmosphere of increased intolerance and xenophobia. For some, the ‘abnormality’ of today’s situation centres less on ethno-cultural difference and more migration as a social and political problem linked to poor wages, corruption, unfairness, and criminality:

*I think more and more there is bad feeling among people towards foreigners and newcomers (priyeczhiym). This only deepens and is supported by the*

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<sup>87</sup> *Solyanka* is a popular Russian soup made up of varying ingredients depending on what is available. In this meaning it is used to describe something mixed together in a fairly haphazard manner without much regard for quality.

*mass media and the atmosphere that reigns all around us. It is also caused by the authorities, who cannot control these migration flows or their presence here in Russia. This situation is getting worse and, of course, it would be really good if things were like back in the USSR, where there was a Friendship of Peoples.*

Marina (25) Language teacher, NN

In respondent assessments of why *druzhba narodov* was successful in the USSR as compared to today, the role of state policy was often seen as central to interethnic harmony. A commonly expressed idea in both age groups was that migration in the USSR was far more carefully managed and confined to certain places rather than being a mass phenomenon. Many respondents revealed their understanding of how Soviet *druzhba narodov* actually worked: each *narod* was almost expected to stay in their home republic, rather than, for example, uproot and come to Russia to find work. Only a selected few were offered the chance to move. In addition, a Union-wide planned economy helped to balance out economic development across the country leaving ‘*more money was in the republics*’ and making it unnecessary to ‘*come to Moscow or Nizhny Novgorod*’ for work (Julia (29) Chemist in State company, NN). In essence, during Soviet Friendship of Nations ‘*in general everybody was happy*’ because ‘*it is not hard to love such people when they live on the territory of their own national republic*’ (Konstantin (27) state municipal management specialist, Moscow). Below is a good example of how the Soviet-era system is remembered as more settled and orderly. New arrivals were carefully selected and allocated places in universities and factories, and, as a result, things were more peaceful. Today, however, migrants arrive *en masse* via a conveyer belt fed by corruption that, in turn, spreads criminality:

*Before it wasn't like this, it wasn't on this scale. People came to us to work at the factory, or went to study at higher education facilities in Tashkent. Here they would be settled in dormitories. Young folk, around twenty years old. They would find jobs for all of them in the factory. In the evenings we would meet, well you know young blood, there would be the odd fight but all that was done in a harmless way (no-допомы) unlike what is going on today (...) those that come today, of the five that arrive, two will go to work,*

*and three will have a clear criminal inclination. (...) They will have no choice but to work through illegal channels.*

**Ilia (46) Import-Export Business owner, NN**

One younger respondent offered a concise description of how the ‘normal’ Soviet-era migrant, who is a good fit with the urban cultural surroundings, contrasts to contemporary ‘*gastarbeiter*’ that cannot be absorbed into the national body:

*The migrant of the early nineties was a person who, let’s say, was around 30 years old when arrived here. He had been born in the USSR and had studied Russian. He would have been acquainted with Russian culture, I mean he would be at a pretty high level. The kind of person who comes here today, the young folk, now I think 30% of them don’t know Russian or Russian culture. (...) If we take all this together with the problems of radical Islam in Central Asia, what we end up with is some kind of monster that arrives here and there is already nothing we can do with him but he is needed because we have low-paid jobs that nobody wants.*

**Viktor (22) International Relations Student, NN.**

Thus, this new type of migrant is a ‘monster’ that cannot be reformed, integrated or made ‘one of us’. While this example is rather extreme, other respondents of varying suggested similar ideas about how today’s migrant differs sharply from what their parents faced in the Soviet period and how the older Soviet system was desirable for today. Overall, the issue of migrants is a complex one with numerous threads to consider. A solid proportion of respondents view *nerusskie migranti* as an undesirable ‘Other’ inside the body of the nation. The desire to either remove these migrants or force them to ‘follow our rules’ represents a form of nationalism common to other European countries. Here an inclusivist civic definition of Russianness makes certain rather uncompromising demands for migrant integration, while the apparent focus on ethno-cultural differences is often tied up with very emotional language connected to ‘disrespect’ and ‘insolence’. While the Soviet legacy of *bratski narodi* is stronger in some older respondents, for others this internationalism is challenged by an increasing sense of ‘our space’ and ‘our

towns' being 'invaded' by 'newcomers'.

The Soviet legacy here works in a complex manner. On the one hand, a strong echo of Soviet internationalism is still present, especially in older respondents, who view the whole post-Soviet space and its peoples as 'ours' and tend to sympathise with migrants as working people. On the other hand, there is a continuation of Soviet Nationalities Policy's strange dualism: the country is a family of different nations but each national group is encouraged to stay in its own homeland. This partly explains how ordinary Russians can combine support for a multinational Russia alongside a demand for a certain 'normality' to be restored in migration that takes its inspiration from Soviet frames.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has highlighted some of the distinctive features behind the common, imagined sense of the Russian 'we'. Central to Russia's distinctive form of 'multiculturalism' is the salience of Soviet legacies. On the one hand, the deeper appeal of *russkii* in contrast to *rossiyanin*, suggests Yeltsin-era rhetoric has not put down deep roots among respondents of either age group. Secondly, rather inclusive non-ethnic definitions of Russianness dominate across the board. For older respondents this emerges from how *russkii* was in practice a supraethnic category in the Soviet period. For younger respondents, *russkii* is conflated with the civic nation that any person, regardless of ethnicity, can join. Membership, however, is subject to assimilation around Russian culture and language. Thirdly, 'nationalism' is firmly rejected, as is the principle of dividing on ethnic lines (such as 'Russia for the Russians' slogans). Instead, many respondents see a 'peaceful' and 'calm' patriotism as more appropriate. Much of the above sentiment is harnessed by state actors and dovetails well with state-directed efforts at nation-building 'from above' (see Putin 2012).

Another distinctive feature to the Russian 'we' is the strength of an unchallenged 'imperial consciousness'. This views the incorporation of various national groups into a common state as peaceful. In other words, the non-Russian peoples did not suffer in this process and neither the Romanov Empire

nor the USSR was 'bad'. Here there is little evidence that Russian 'colonialism' or 'imperialism' has been deconstructed or problematized among respondents. No respondents offered any suggestion that this past, when looked at through the eyes of non-Russians, could be seen differently. This will be returned to in chapter seven, where we find very limited articulations on Russia's leading role in the Eurasian space, perhaps because Russia's dominance in the region is 'common sense': something taken to be so 'natural' and 'given' it does not require unpacking. This imperial consciousness perpetuates Soviet-era hierarchies and involves common-sense knowledge on an imagined harmony of Russians and non-Russians: 'we peacefully integrated the "smaller nations" into a great state' 'we have always had interethnic harmony' 'druzhba narodov was a real thing'. Just as in the Soviet period, the role of ethnic Russians as the leading group is not specifically articulated but commonly understood; while the *malie narodi* may have their own native languages and customs, in actual fact, when people in the Russian Federation come together to do important things they all essentially become '*russkie*'. This imperial consciousness is reinforced by statist narratives, revealed in attitudes to the North Caucasus, where support for the Kremlin's current policy subsidising and holding on to the region is not explained in terms of 'integration' or 'multiculturalism' but the statist priorities of geopolitical balance, national security and deterring separatism. Overall, Russia's 'imperial' thinking does not contradict the non-ethnic, civic conception of the Russian nation state promoted by state policy; if anything it reinforces it.

Thus, what has emerged in this chapter is how a Soviet-style Russocentric version of the civic nation predominates. This is largely made up of a certain 'imperial consciousness', statist narratives and Soviet-era understandings of Russianness, nation, nationalism, patriotism and multiculturalism, which appear to be passed on to a younger generation. The above form another important component of hegemonic nationalist discourse in Russia today. Its fundamental function is to present the 'Russians' as a generous, welcoming and open people, the kind of group to which any person would want to belong. Yet, as we have seen, there are cracks in this picture of harmonic unity and they revolve around concern over certain 'abnormal' elements. This chapter

has shown that many assess 'Russia as a multinational state' today very much in reference to the 'normal' way it was organised in the Soviet era. This 'normality' consists of most national groups remaining on 'their own lands' while together, these national groups work in one 'multinational state'. Migration, when it does occur, is carefully controlled and involves only those candidates able and willing to learn Russian and respect the culture and traditions of the majority. While non-Russians are free to retain their own languages and cultures, they are expected to happily assimilate into the wider Russian cultural and linguistic space.

Perhaps one reason that migrants and the people of the North Caucasus are subject to 'othering' is the 'abnormality' of their position; they deviate from Soviet-framed norms. On the one hand, they are seen to resist integration and assimilation: they do not think, talk or behave like a *kul'turnii* or *russkii chelovek*. These people are seen to gang together to resist the peaceful, harmonic *druzhba narodov* narrative and adopt an independent and hostile stance: they 'do not play by our rules' and have 'a totally alien culture.' This is an emotional narrative that focuses on status; migrants and *kavkaztsy* seek to 'humiliate', gain an 'unfair position' and show 'disrespect'. As we have seen, the question of whether these negative stereotypes become activated can depend on how much contact people have with these 'Others'. The more actual positive social interactions people of different backgrounds have, the less likely such thinking will prevail. Furthermore, it is clear that a large number of older respondents still often treat all the people of the former USSR as 'one people' bound together with a common fate. Younger respondents, however, are more likely to apply an assimilationist and integrationist model that treats '*russkii*' as a non-ethnic cultural and linguistic category into which all other ethnic groups can (or should) merge.

In this chapter, the key challenge to above vision of the Russian nation and Russianness is not framed in terms of democracy or liberalism; instead a certain populist 'put Russia first' nationalism was identified. This rejects the inclusion of labour migrants or the North Caucasus region into the Russian 'we'; there is clear hostility to subsidising 'these people' (stop sending 'them' 'our' tax money – 'enough feeding of the North Caucasus'). These nationalistic

sentiments were espoused not by people who called themselves ‘nationalists’ or showed any interest in the slogan ‘Russia for the Russians’. Instead, the leitmotif was that ‘our citizens’ need to be put first, a theme that we will return to in chapter Seven in attitudes to the ‘Russians of the Near Abroad’. In many ways, attitudes to the North Caucasus are a microcosm of the current equilibrium in Russian national discourse: statist and geopolitical priorities encourage people to swallow their dissatisfaction over inequality, unfairness and corruption and accept the priority should be peace, stability and securing Russia as a great power. The theme of great power goals and statist rhetoric combining with the conservative worldview of the many is important to the final two chapters of this thesis, which examine how people understand the domestic political system and their response to Russia’s changing position in world politics.

## Chapter Six

### Who rules the nation and how? Viewing legitimacy and trust ‘from below’

The essence of this chapter is to explore how ordinary Russians perceive, negotiate, challenge and reaffirm the political configuration of the country and leadership of the nation. One key question here is one of legitimacy; how far, on one hand, the activities of the political class and the state are congruent with the aspirations of the ‘nation’, and, on the other, how far the leader of the country, Vladimir Putin, embodies the ‘nation’ in terms of his character, style of rule and actions. Even in Russia’s increasingly authoritarian context, politicians and parties (re)define aspects of national identity to fit in with their policies and, in the process, strive to make themselves and their policies appear congruent with the concerns of the ‘people’ and the ‘nation’. What will be examined is how political legitimacy and trust in the leader is internalized, transmitted and, at times, subverted or challenged. This chapter offers further evidence of how Soviet legacies, as well as lived and transmitted memory of 1988-1998, shape political stances today, leading to a conservative worldview that is central to the current hegemonic nationalist discourse in Russia today.

This can be described as the ‘Putin consensus’, which I will unpack as an essentially conservative social contract that is strongly influenced by Soviet legacies. The chapter also introduces an important dynamic that has been partially touched on in the previous two chapters: the split in normative standards between those who do and do not take the late Soviet period as a benchmark for normality. This split is visible in the more positive and negative versions of the Russian ‘self-image’: either as stoic endurance and resilience, or servility, passivity and paternalistic urges. Thus, a diverse group of respondents contest the ‘Putin consensus’, criticising a whole range of deficiencies in Russia in comparison to ‘normal modern states’, providing ample material for the creation of an anti-hegemonic discourse to arise. The content of this contestation is often unclear in quantitative polling; this chapter remedies this by shedding light on why people are critical of the *status quo* in Russia today. Attitudes to the Information War allow an examination of how



polarisation along political lines is proceeding in a Russia that, according to opinion polls, is strongly behind the political leadership.<sup>88</sup> Before turning to the empirical findings, however, I would like to focus on some important theoretical considerations.

### **Theorising political legitimacy**

As Putin approaches twenty years in power, the challenge is to gauge the effects of these past two decades on the imagined relationship between leader, state and people. Research into Russian domestic politics often revolves around two central questions: the nature of the system and the character of mass political behaviour. On the first point, there is a rough consensus that a ‘hybrid regime’ has emerged under Putin: a ‘mild to medium form of authoritarianism’ combined with democratic façade: ‘elements of electoral democracy, pluralism, civil society, and respect for human rights’. (Reddaway 2012: 102-103). This is also seen as a ‘Managed Democracy’, a system of ‘electoral authoritarianism’ with ‘uneven playing fields’ (Gel’man 2012: 504). In the categorisation of Thomas Carothers (2002), Russia belongs to a group of countries in the ‘grey zone’ between democratic and authoritarian states. This preoccupation with placing Russia on the spectrum between ‘democracy’ and ‘authoritarianism’ often reflects the desire of political scientists to apply abstract political theory to a ‘case study’. This can also be influenced by the writer’s own political convictions.

From the point of view of this research, this ‘transition paradigm’ is limited utility when it comes to explaining how the people living within such a system conceptualise it. As Stephen Holmes (2015: 32) pointed out, by using terms such as ‘semi-authoritarian’ or ‘hybrid regime’, these authors imply that ‘democracy’ is the only way forward and that this is ‘the appropriate framework for locating the point at which Russia got “stuck” in its otherwise natural or at least wished for trajectory from authoritarian to democratic rule’.

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<sup>88</sup> Polling data shows approval rates for the ‘Government of Russia’ were as low as 39% in November 2013 but rose to 62% in June 2015. Rates for the Duma over the same period show 33% approval in November 2013 and June reaching high of 54%. The approval of Putin, went from a low of 61% in November 2013 to a record high of 89% in June 2015. The latest data from September 2016 show - 47% approve of the Governments activities, 40% disapprove of the State Duma’s activities – but, all the same, 82% approve of president’s activities. <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/>

What emerges in this chapter is how, when making sense of Russia's political system and state configuration, few respondents refer to 'democracy' and 'authoritarianism' as the main alternatives between which Russia's leaders must choose. I would argue what is more central to their descriptions is the concept of what is 'normal' – and understanding what is 'normal' is largely determined by certain frames of reference points and the adoption or rejection of certain political myths, all of which can differ among social and age groups.

While the 'transition paradigm' is of limited use in explaining how the Russian political system is understood 'from below', one model of interest is Delegative Democracy (DD), which was theorised by the Argentinian scholar Guillermo A. O'Donnell. Similar to some Latin American countries, post-Soviet Russia also shares historical inexperience of democracy and recent memories of deep socio-economic crisis. The main characteristics of DD that apply to the Russian case include the emergence of a popular, charismatic leader who wins a sweeping majority at a time when confidence in public institutions (such as political parties, the courts, the press, the police) is low. Presenting itself as 'the embodiment of the nation and the main custodian and definer of its interests' (O'Donnell 1994: 60), 'a government of saviors' promises to take the bold measures required to 'save the country' (ibid: 65). The applicability of O'Donnell's model to the Russian context can be explained through the contexts of 'normality' and 'political myths'. It is seen as 'normal' for a strong leader to bypass institutions and ensure order and stability, as it is 'normal' for Russians to want a strong leader. Political myths about the 'abnormal' and traumatic recent past (the wild nineties) offer a foundational myth for why 'a government of saviors' is needed. These myths encourage the rise of the 'plebiscitary' presidency, as every four to six years the president is given another mandate to broaden his powers and take on more challenges (Rogov 2015: 1321). Thus, ideas of what is 'normal' are buttressed by myths on how it is 'natural' for Russians, given their characteristics/habits, to be ruled/led in such a fashion.

The second question, the relationship between people and the state, is often answered with reference to Russians as 'apolitical', 'submissive', or 'easy to manipulate'. To take one example, Shevtsova (2015: 25) presents Russians as 'an atomized people' that is 'brainwashed' and at the mercy of propagandists

who believe that ‘if an action is deemed necessary, ideas will be found to justify it’. Another aspect highlighted by authors is the gap that exists between the people and the state in Russia. In an article in *Novaya Gazeta*, Vladimir Pastukhov (2012) highlighted the deep historical roots of this yawning chasm between state and people in Russian statecraft across the Romanov and Soviet eras, continuing into the post-Soviet period. In the words of Holmes (2015: 41) this is still a factor today, although the dynamic has shifted somewhat as now ‘Russia’s rich and powerful’ are driven by ‘single-minded self enrichment’ and have ‘little commitment to national development’. This chapter also examines how ordinary people imagine the relationship between leader, state organs and people, and argues that ideas of what is ‘normal’ is reinforced by the existence of a certain imagined social contract between the nation (the people) and the leadership (the President).

The central importance of normality to national identity is that it reinforces the sense that a given national *status quo* can be acceptable. The ‘normality’ of a political order inspires trust between rulers and ruled (Misztal 2001: 322). Here, we can expect more than one version of normality to exist in the population; generational, social and cultural differences between certain groups in society make it likely they will have differing ideas about what is ‘normal’ and ‘natural’. Thus, frames of reference are vital in understanding these differences. In this chapter, the division of ‘frames of normality’ is an important feature in exposing fault lines in the political nation. In this it is important to highlight how what is ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’ is contested, and when we look at how individuals differ in their positions in this question, it is often the ‘frame’ that is important.

One of the ways visions of ‘normality’ are reproduced is through the transmission and reproduction of political myths. Here it is important to understand political ‘myth’ not as a synonym for ‘narrative’ or other forms of ‘false belief’ (Bottici and Challand 2015: 2). Work must be done on a narrative to transform it into myth; it must possess an ‘emotional underpinning’ and ‘add significance to the world’ (ibid: 90-92). The importance of these political myths, is that they act as a ‘vehicle of legitimization’ (Hutcheson, Petersson 2016: 1109). Political myths ‘serve to tell a story of why who governs has the

right to do so and why we should obey’ and ‘create links between governing and its subjects’ (de Salla 2010: 5). This chapter examines a number of important political myths operating in the Russian context and attempts to explain their appeal. In examining how political myths operate, the social identity approach to understanding successful leadership in groups is useful (Fielding, Hogg 1997). This views leadership as something that emerges from: ‘the creation, co-ordination and control of a shared sense of “us.” Within this relationship neither the individual nor the group is static. What “us” means is negotiable, and so too is the contribution that leaders and followers make to any particular definition of “us-ness”’ (Haslam 2001: 85).

In summarising the qualities of Putin as they are presented in the mass media, a variety of authors have examined the more outward and staged performative aspects of Putin’s masculinity as the action hero and macho sex object (Goscilo 2012; Riabov and Riabova 2014; Sperling 2016).<sup>89</sup> The image of Putin as a vigorous and dynamic leader with clearly desirable masculine qualities is reinforced by myths on the President’s role as a ‘saviour’, a point that links well with O’Donell’s framework of Delegative Democracy (O’Donell 1994:65). Bo Petersson (2013, 2016) also argues that Putin owes much of his popularity due to his place within a certain popularly accepted mythical framework that views Russia as an eternal world power (*derzhava*)<sup>90</sup> that only returns to her rightful place after overcoming periods of upheaval and dislocation (*smuta*). Today, Putin is seen to be the central actor in pulling Russia out of *smuta* while restoring her *derzhava* status. This foundational myth, which takes the ‘abnormality’ of the nineties as its starting point, clearly legitimises the political leadership and helps bond people to its goals.

The second set of myths on display in this chapter focus on the ‘qualities’ of the Russians as a people. Here we find ‘self-categories that define the individual in terms of his or her shared similarities with members of certain social categories’ (Turner et al 1994: 454). The social identity approach to explaining the popularity of the political leadership takes into account the

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<sup>89</sup> It has been claimed this is part of the ‘remasculinization of Russia,’ which emerged in response to the challenging years of 1991-1999. This explains Putin’s as part of the ‘restoration of collective male dignity’, something that ‘meets the psychological needs of a significant part of Russian society’ (Riabov and Riabova 2014: 32).

<sup>90</sup> A difficult term to translate into English that combines the idea of being ‘a power’ and a ‘strong state’

dominance of certain views of the national character. Rather than linking the positive characteristics of the ‘people’ to the similar attributes of the ‘leader’, we find cultural idioms describing ‘what we are like as a people’ linked to conclusions about what this means for how ‘we should be governed’. This brings us to Michael Herzfeld’s concept of ‘cultural intimacy’: ‘the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nonetheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality’ (Herzfeld 1997: 3). In other words it is ‘part of cultural identity that insiders do *not* want outsiders to get to know’ but still provide feelings of national comfort, group solidarity and categorical unity (Herzfeld 2013: 491). Sardonic and humorous representations of the national character should not be dismissed; they represent one important way people ‘negotiate the terrain of social identity and daily life in the (...) modern nation-state’ (Herzfeld 1997: 91).

It is also important to note the contestable nature of normality and myth, which are subject to changing contexts, and events, as well as shifting social environments and generations. The emergence of counter-myths and new frames of normality can undermine and break down hegemonic stances among people to the political leadership of the country. One interesting area to trace this in a Russian context is the so-called ‘Information War’. As Richard Sakwa has pointed out, in the current climate Russians are faced by ‘the constant structuring of binaries’ (Sakwa 2015: 199); we have the ‘good’ patriots and the ‘bad’ fascists or nationalists; the ‘normal’, ‘loyal’ people and the ‘treacherous’ fifth column turncoats; the ‘honest defenders’ of Russia and those trying to sell her out. Attitudes shown by respondents to the Information War in this chapter contest the notion that Russians are passive victims of state propaganda; instead conflicting frames of normality exist among different social and generational groups that have important ramifications for whether certain myths about Putin or the Russian people are absorbed and internalised, or, conversely, contested and rejected.

### **The empirical findings**

The rest of the chapter is divided into four sections. In the first, I examine what

may be called the 'Pro-Putin Consensus'. I explore how the figure of Putin successfully bridges the gap between state and people, ensuring the President appears to be one who 'stands for the nation'. In this section we find interesting empirical evidence for how the social identity approach to leadership can be applied to a Russian context and how the image of the leader contrasts to the image of the people (*narod*). What emerges is the central role of commonly-held negative views of the Russian mentality/character as 'lazy' or 'passive', traits that justify the rule of a 'strong leader'. This is a narrative with rich roots in pre-revolutionary and Soviet political discourse and acts as an important feature of Russian national identity today. In addition, certain myths about Putin's personality and performance as leader are examined, which serve as justification for his manual rule (*ruchnoe upravlenie*) of the country. These myths are found to be largely appropriate to the model of 'Delegative Democracy' or 'plebiscitary presidency' described by Guillermo A. O'Donnell.

In the second part of the chapter I explore how lived experience of 1988-1998 is important to national identity in the way it shapes political attitudes and stances today. Memories of politics in the late Soviet era provide a 'frame' from which to understand 'normal' political behaviour and a 'normally' functioning political system. What emerges is how many see political inactivity as 'normal' within the context of recent lived experience. This ties in with the commonly reproduced stereotype of Russians as 'peaceful', 'patient' and willing to endure all kinds of hardship without expressing anger. Thus, Soviet-inspired frames of normality help justify non-involvement in politics and encourage a preference for devolving almost unlimited power into the hands of the capable President, a picture that again resonates with the model of Delegative Democracy. Thus, *Homo Sovieticus* lives on in today's Russia in the behaviour of people who are still in favour of the *status quo*. This is challenged by the presence of a diverse number of respondents who do not want a return to the late Soviet-era social contract and are critical of Russian 'paternalism', viewing dependence on the state as a backward tendency.

This division in frames of normality is also visible in part three, where I examine widespread negative attitudes to the contemporary Russian state, which many imagine as a corrupt layer of bureaucrats standing between the

leader and the people. I consider how the ‘abnormality’ of this state is explained in divergent ways: older respondents viewed it as deviating from Soviet norms while younger respondents focused on the failure to meet the standards of a developed modern state in the context of the twenty-first century. This division in normality frames is important; it re-emerges in attitudes to the Russian national character, how people explain Putin’s popularity and the Information War.

In the final section of this chapter, the attention shifts to those areas where the Putin image and its associated myths are far more contested. This shatters the monolithic picture of the pro-Putin consensus, highlighting the significant potential for an anti-hegemonic discourse to emerge. A significant number of respondents discussed Putin’s popularity with some analytical distance or irony. In other words, this is not something they believe in personally but view as packaged up and delivered for the ‘masses of Russia’. This is a tendency with rich roots in pre-revolutionary Russia, where the urban intelligentsia struggled to find common ground with the peasantry. Here, as in section one, political passivity and state paternalism are criticized as part of Russian backwardness, rather than some admirable ‘special path’. Frames of normality also appear to play an important role in determining stances toward Putin’s domestic policies. Those who ‘framed’ the question in reference to the ‘chaos’ of the nineties are far less critical than those who ‘frame’ it in terms of a comparison to the ‘modern and developed’ states of the twenty-first century.

The chapter concludes with an exploration of how the Information War, and the unity suggested in Putin’s sky-high approval polls, conceals deeper social and cultural polarisation in the country. While the explosion of state media propaganda noticeable since Maidan (2013-2014) has rallied some behind the leader, it has also provoked confusion and dismay among many who see the new media coverage style as ‘abnormal’. Here generational lines are important in responding to the Information War as this is connected to media consumption patterns. Thus, the final section offers evidence that Putin-era ‘normality’ and its associated ‘mythology’ is being challenged and that many resist these efforts to impose national unity upon them ‘from above’.

## Part one: Putin's image and the Russian 'character'

A wide range of respondents reproduced the well-worn traits of Putin as a dynamic and vigorous leader; for many respondents Putin is clearly accepted as 'one of us' rather than 'one of them' (i.e. another corrupt deputy or venal official). It appears an idealised version of Putin's character and image links up with rather negative stereotypes on the Russian national character. This brings us back to the Social Identity approach to explaining successful leadership: the idea that the leader and the 'nation' achieve a kind of fusion of purpose when qualities of the 'leader' are those needed by the population. In the Russian case it appears many respondents view Putin's qualities as precisely what ordinary Russians should have (and by implication lack): strength, stamina and vigour and a very clear and rational mind carefully tuned to achieving key objectives.

Putin '*speaks sharply*' (*rezko*) and in '*concrete terms*', it is admirable that he '*does that which he promises*' (Yegor (44) Newspaper editor, NN). Furthermore, he is able to '*formulate goals in a clear (chetkii) manner*' and '*his goals match with our desires*' (Artem (49) computer programmer, NN). Putin's intelligence and sharpness means he is able to '*hold an enormous amount of information in his head*' and be an effective and competent '*boss (khozyain)*' (Dmitri (28) Actor, SPB). Putin was also commonly described by male respondents as a '*strong person*', the ideal of a '*real man*' (*nastoyashchiy muzhik*); a person with '*inner determination*' (*vnutrenniy sterzhen'*). Putin's resolute and steadfast manner contrasts from the hysterics of European leaders who '*twitter like magpies*' while Putin '*is silent and does what he does*' (Igor, (41) Lecturer in International Relations, NN). Female respondents praised Putin as someone to be proud of even if '*a bit abrupt and uncompromising (...) at least he is ready to answer for his words*'. (Julia (47) Assistant in film set production, SPB).

Respondents of all ages were familiar with this image, which has been reproduced on a mass scale in the media for the best part of fifteen years.<sup>91</sup> What is interesting is how this contrasts with popular views of the Russian national character. One part of this is the idea that Russians, especially in

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<sup>91</sup> A similar picture emerges in quantitative polling. In answer to the question 'What attracts you to President Putin', the highest scoring answer was 'He is a decisive, brave, hard, wilful, strong, calm, precise and confident person, a real man' <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/20/11/2017/5a0ee7229a79473d4ad7988a>



comparison to Westerners, are disorganised, sloppy and less than conscientious: *‘I think one of the key characteristics of the Russian (rossiyanina) is for things to be a total fucking shambles. (raspizdyaystvo). It has always been this way. It is like, “who cares”, like stealing a crate of vodka to sell but then drinking half of it (...) Stupidity’* (Denis (41) Journalist, NN). This kind of chaotic behaviour, the classic image of Russian-style drunken chaos, is something that is the antithesis of the sober, sharp and wily Putin. Russian ‘slackness’ was also discussed in terms of a lack of professionalism in the workplace, such as the idea that European workers and managers *‘approach things very rigorously, they try to do everything with quality’* while their Russian counterparts follow *‘the principle of the “Russian Ivan”, which is basically saying “yeah right, that’ll do, fine”* (Anastasia (21) Economics Student, NN). Thus, while the *‘Russian will forget about his own affairs’* and suffer from *‘fecklessness (bezalabernost)’*, the *‘Western person, will keep working until it is completely finished, according to what is written on the contract’*. (Galina (40) Sociology department, NN).

Given the prominent place of these self-images it is unsurprising to find many respondents support the idea that Russians need to be ruled by a strong hand, and that a person with Putin’s personal qualities is a good fit: *‘Our people are very lazy and until you actually kick them, they won’t do a thing’* (Matvei (43) Double-glazing installer, NN). This could also be explained in terms of Russia as a semi-Asiatic country that has to be ‘kicked into shape’: *‘We are more-or-less an Asian country, I think we can’t do things ourselves, we need to be kicked. We can’t make it without a Tsar (...) we are an Eastern country and cannot be fully Western in mentality (...) and we can’t be so for a long time’* (Julia (47) Assistant in film set production, SPB).

The above sentiment also ties in with the general idea that the ‘Russian mentality’ and ‘democracy’ do not go well together: *‘the number one person is the owner/boss (khozyain)’* and *‘democracy has brought nothing good with it: Multipolarity of opinions only leads to tittle-tattle (peresudam) until someone says “right, enough!” and then everyone goes where they are told’* (Grigori (49) Computer programmer, NN). This links into a strong historical myth discussed in chapter four, the idea that Russia only prospers when she has a ‘strong leader’

at the helm. The connection between this interpretation of the Russian mentality and Putin's personal qualities is one part of the popularity of Putin. The idealized image of Putin that respondents reproduced may represent a desirable version of the Russian 'we'; following Putin expresses hope that he will 'kick us into shape' and remedy the negative elements of the Russian self-image. Interestingly, the 'cultural intimacy' revealed in portrayals of 'what we are like as a people' are not connected to despair. Instead, they often reveal acceptance of a common social identity and, at the same time, a certain confidence that the strong leader can overcome these problems 'from above'. This is, in turn, buttressed by certain myths about Putin's performance as leader.

Two key narratives on Putin intertwine to create a foundational myth of Putinism. The first is that Putin pulled Russia up from her knees and out of a period of disorder (*smuta*). The second is that he has restored her as a great power (*derzhava*). The backdrop for this foundational myth was always set in the last years of the 1990's, a time remembered by young and old as a dark period, with a variety of important threads emerging. The first is memories of uncertainty and the fear things would fall apart. Russians '*had endured so much in the 90's and accepted for a long time that "yes, this is perestroika, and it will take a long time" but then, after all they went through, it all fell apart again in the 1998 default (...) after this people were thoroughly disillusioned by liberal values*'. It was in this atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that Putin appeared alongside a wave of terrorist attacks (1999-2000) and looked like '*a tough person who will put things in order. The phrase "snuff them out in the latrines" was one the population, naturally, really liked*'. (Evgeny (30) sales manager construction materials, SPB).

The phrase 'snuff them out in the latrines' came from a Putin press conference that defined his early militant stance towards terrorists and was mentioned by several respondents looking back on the period when Putin emerged on the political arena. It seems these words are remembered as the moment bringing an end to the 'anything goes' atmosphere prevalent in the nineties. This contrasts the nineties and the Putin period as two distinct phases: the first is 'an orgy of criminality', while the second is a new order dominated by the *siloviki*

(the security organs):

*In 1991 when Yeltsin came to power, everything was allowed. There were no big restrictions. You weren't allowed to kill people of course, but the rest was allowed. Back then very large amounts of money were divided up, there was a really massive orgy of criminality (ochen' sil'nyy razgul kriminala), people were shot on the streets, bandits ran the show. Then, as time passed, they started passing laws restricting all this. Now power has passed to the cops and the security structures (mentam i silovym strukturam).*

Denis (41) Journalist, NN

It is worth underlining that Putin is not seen to take the power from the 'criminals' and restore democracy or liberate institutions to function independently; instead this is a transfer of power to his *silovik* entourage. This centralisation of power is understood to ignore democratic norms.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, the arrival of Putin is remembered as ending a period of fear, uncertainty, immorality and chaos, bringing to a close many of the 'abnormal' aspects of life in the nineties. Central to the Putin's mythology is the idea that he '*pulled the country out of the total mess it was stuck in during the Yeltsin years*' and '*brought her into a more decent/acceptable condition (...) he led a huge country into a more normal condition, in comparison to what it was in up to that point*' (Eva (26) Unemployed, university graduate, NN). Here the restoration of normality is a key theme. Putin is praised not so much for 'making Russia great' but for returning 'normality' and 'decency' to everyday life. This idea of returning 'normality' has a very powerful emotional component. This involves remembering/imagining the period immediately prior to Putin's presidency as one of depression and degradation when, according to popular memory, Russian people lost face, status and dignity. This was a period when '*we were deep down at the bottom. We were poor, a destitute population, without subsistence*' and it was only by the second half of the 2000s that '*things started to smoothen out (vyravnivat'sya)*' and '*people started to live better*' (Marta (54) retired, SPB). The common experience or imagined sense of humiliation from the

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<sup>92</sup> Levada Centre polling supports the view that large numbers of Russians understand the nature of the Putin's power base: when asked what sectors of the population Putin relies on most, 51% selected *siloviki*, followed by 35% choosing oligarchs and 31% state officials (*chinovniki*) <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/20/11/2017/5a0ee7229a79473d4ad7988a>

nineties crossed the generational divide; younger respondents could rely on their childhood memories to confirm this picture:

*The period of Putin's leadership is the best one for the country because the 90's were the absolutely most terrible (zhutkie) years for Russia. It was a nightmare, it was all corruption, bribes, illegal business (chernyy biznes), rackets, kidnappings, murders on every corner (...) A person living in the 90's felt like an insect, humiliated and embarrassed of living in Russia. The view of other countries was like looking up, servile. But now, the generation that has grown up in the 2000's to now, they are proud of their country.*

Nadezhda (30) nanny, SPB

This idea of the Putin era ending an era of humiliation is central to the other component of the Putin foundational myth, that the President restored Russia's power vis-à-vis the outside world, reflecting strong desires to return to the 'normal' way the Soviet state behaved on the world stage, something I will examine in more detail in the next chapter. Putin's foreign policy impresses in terms of its independent stance: *'He doesn't cave in to anyone. Russians, in the main, think that the country has its own path of development, as we are neither Asia nor Europe. That is why Putin has won such respect from Russian people'* (Eva (26) Unemployed, university graduate, NN). Putin is thought to have successfully reduced Russia's dependency on the outside world, something that, especially among older respondents, was seen as a serious weakness. Putin *'got rid of all the ringleaders of that market bacchanalia'* and *'then he paid off the debts and then implemented his own vision. The main thing is that the country started to develop according to its own path, not simply doing how we are told'*. (Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB).

Younger respondents also showed faith in Putin as an actor on the world stage, mainly focusing on his seemingly *'independent position'* vis-à-vis the West who does *'what is best for Russia and not what the West wants'*, ensuring the *'opinion of Russia is reckoned with by foreign powers'* (Dina, (22) IR Student, NN). Putin is imagined to have *'lifted Russia from her knees'* by *'taking a hard position'*, thus restoring Russia to a *'good position'* on the world stage; his

success in foreign policy can be enough to convince those, who might otherwise be unimpressed by internal economic development, to support him:

*I really like Vladimir Putin even if, basically, he has done nothing for me, neither good nor bad (...) I think I am positive toward him because of the figure he presents, his image, because he presents himself as being so powerful (takim mogushchestvennym) and that he represents the whole of Russia and it is like he tells the other countries that they need to reckon with us (s nami nado schitat'sya).*

Katya (22) Student Politics, NN

The emotional component in this narrative of Putin restoring *derzhava* status is vital; the idea that he has made Russia ‘a country to be reckoned with’ was commonly reproduced and suggests imagining Russia as a country that, once downtrodden and degraded, is now respected and treated with respect. For many respondents, this foundational myth offered solid justification for the increasing concentration of power in Putin’s hands. This myth provides a vital context-rich explanation for why Russia needs a ‘government of saviours’ to rescue her. Thus, the imagined fit between the positive qualities of the leader and the negative attributes of the Russian national character is combined with the popular internalisation and transmission of foundational myths to justify and legitimise popular withdrawal from politics in favour of ‘delegating power’ to a ‘strong leader’. As we will see in the next section, this sentiment is also informed by memories of 1988-1998 in an everyday and family context.

## **Part two: Memories of the late Soviet period**

One highly observable trend among respondents recalling personal and family/friend political positions from Perestroika to Putin was the stance of general disengagement. For older respondents this was reported as remembered lived historical memory, for younger respondents this was a transmitted history of family behaviour in the period. Employing the idea of ‘normality’ and ‘abnormality’, many respondents defined a ‘normal’ family as not interested in politics and retaining a certain ‘calmness’ or ‘peacefulness’ (*spokoistvo*). In contrast, politically active behaviour such as waving flags, actively joining parties or protesting on the streets was presented as exceptional: *my parents*

*were not revolutionaries, they did burst forward with a flag in their hands (oni ne rvalis' vperod s flagom). It was more like they felt some light dissatisfaction, but as a whole they stayed calm.* (Lev (46) Programmer Developer Oracle, SPB).

Interestingly, younger respondents also described political inactivity and passivity when asked about their parents in perestroika, without adding any particular criticism or judgement of this behaviour. As above, the lack of political activity is portrayed as 'normal' behaviour for a 'typical peaceful family.' There was a sense that being politically 'inactive' and disinterested in ideology, parties and protests is the 'normal' and 'default' position in families, while it is only the 'strange' that become fascinated with politics: *My parents didn't take an active political position. (...) They weren't active party members or participants in any demonstrations or protests. They never went to anything like that. Just a normal, peaceful family. (Obychnaya spokojnaya sem'ya)* (Julia (29) Chemist in State company, NN). This ties in well with quantitative polling that suggests the vast majority of Russians today still do not want to be active in politics.<sup>93</sup>

Throughout these narratives of family behaviour in the late Soviet period, very few respondents described perestroika and the end of the USSR in positive terms, such as the story of how people *actively* came together to win their freedom and overthrow the tyranny of the Communist Party in a relatively bloodless fashion. Instead, respondents presented the process of political reform as alien and imposed from above by party agitators and experienced *passively*. As the respondent below points out, these reforms were not demanded 'from below' as people lived in relative comfort: *'My parents, just like the rest of the population, did not understand perestroika, except that it was a kind of visible (political MB) agitation (...) on the TV and news (...) But in general people did not want any kind of changes because everyone lived well, there was enough for everyone'* (Ilia (46) Import-Export Business owner, NN).

Older respondents claimed the reforms of 1985-1999 were driven by those 'those at top', without the engagement of the masses: *'people didn't*

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<sup>93</sup> Recent polling shows that 52% are 'definitely not prepared to personally participate in politics', and 28% are 'probably not prepared'. In their attitudes to the state, 61% claimed 'to avoid with the authorities' and prefer 'to rely on themselves'.  
<https://www.levada.ru/2017/04/13/nepoliticheskaya-natsiya/>

*particularly take part in all this, they behaved purely as observers’ (Natalya (50) Accountant, NN).* Older respondents rarely described the reform era as one where people had a real chance of influencing events. Instead, respondents admitted to their own de-politicized existence and often portrayed the world of politics as a place where only certain influential and powerful people could operate. This view suggests many people in the late Soviet did not take sides in the reform debates. Employing the metaphor of an ocean, the tranquillity of those working and living at ‘the lower depths’ (*kak na dne*) is contrasted to the dramatic and energetic events bubbling over at the surface:

*Actually down at the bottom, where we run around, there was no sense of being advocates of one thing or another. People lived and worked, I don’t know how to say it, like we were at the lower depths. Up on top, passions boil over, there are storms in the sea. At the bottom there was a dead calm...*

Olga (55) Factory worker Avtozavodsk, NN

This brings us to another important aspect of Soviet-era political behaviour that is still important today: the preference for turning one’s back on politics and focusing on one’s personal world of work, family and friends. It was striking how many older respondents described the normality of their disinterest in politics, which they saw as distant from their everyday lives. Physics student Viktor (51) claimed ‘*Politics was not in our field of vision*’ and ‘*our circle was highly educated, we could read what we wanted to*’. For Viktor, late Soviet life offered him all he needed as a member of the technical intelligentsia and there was no need to get involved in politics: ‘*personally I couldn’t have cared less about what was going on at the top because I could study mathematics, I could go out with my friends (...) all of that (politics) was somehow remote; it had no relation to my life*’ (Andrei (51) Computer Programmer, SPB).

Thus, ignoring politics in the perestroika period is ‘normal’ as everything ‘*is decided at the level of the elite (verkhushki)*’ (Natalya (50) Accountant, NN). Retrospectively looking back at lived experience of this period, some older respondents did remember the exciting atmosphere of the late eighties when ‘*Russian people realised that they could change things and everyone awaited*

*change in the country*'. This, however, faded away, and was replaced by a great sense of disempowerment, disappointment and alienation:

*Over twenty years normal people (normal'nyye lyudi) came to realise that we simple folk (prostyye) can't change a thing, everything stays in its place. After that people started to distance themselves – you are there, we are here. In Russia it has always been the case that the elite (verkhushka) does its own thing, it is like a separate state. Ordinary people say 'you don't bother us and we won't bother you'.*

Oleg (49) Construction site foreman, SPB

Thus, the division between the elite and the ordinary people was commonly reproduced. Such memories of political alienation and passivity are complemented by the way respondents of all ages commonly claimed 'passivity', 'inertia' or 'patience' was a typical feature of Russian national character, especially in terms of political behaviour. The sense of Russian 'endurance' was often rendered with the word '*terpenie*', which combines ideas of holding one's patience, endurance, fortitude and forbearance. This idea here is that the Russians are, by their nature, very calm and '*will endure to the very last (terpit do poslednego), right to the very final extreme, and only then will they raise a revolt (bunt)*' (Galina (40) Sociology department, NN). Thus, this 'passivity' was not always explained in a negative sense but felt to be a result of Russia's tumultuous twentieth century, which was full of exhausting upheavals, leaving Russians today quite justified in seeking a 'peaceful life' without 'upheavals' (Natalya (50) Accountant, NN).

This brings us back to the idea of 'cultural intimacy', that an attribute that could cause some embarrassment and defensiveness if raised by an 'outsider' to the group, can function within the group to produce feelings of commonality. One common way this was done was by comparing the Russian disinterest in being politically active or making boisterous demands to political authorities with other Europeans and Westerners. Unlike the Europeans '*who go on marches, protests or strikes with enviable frequency (...) we don't know how to make revolutions, we just don't have it in the blood*'. Looking at political behaviour in this way, political inactivity is 'normal' and 'natural' for Russians



given that, looking back at the recent past, mass protests are seen to have achieved little: *We are accustomed to enduring, it like we say “that is how things are, and let’s keep it that way”. (...) It might actually be a good thing we are that way.* (Katya (22) Student Politics, NN). A further way to ‘normalise’ this difference is to put it within the context of the Russian environment: *they (Europeans MB) haven’t experienced the wide-ranging upheavals we have over many years, they believe in the law and the defence of the courts. Russian people are like... they don’t believe in anything and don’t expect anything from our state and government* (Elena (29) Accountant, Dzershinsk, NN).

For some respondents the tendency of Russians to ‘endure’, or ‘to take things as they are and get on with things’ is taken more openly as a source of pride. It appears this tough enduring manner is part of a deeper Soviet mentality, a stance taken by generations of Soviet Russian families to survive the enormous challenges of collectivization, industrialisation, terror, war and, later, the economy of shortages and *blat*. To negotiate this people did not resort to complaints or protests, which would be ruinous to oneself and family and achieve ‘nothing’. Instead they did what their parents had done in previous crisis situations: they got on with ‘surviving’:

*When Gorbachev came to power, that was all just a total scam (...) but what could you do? All that was left was to accept things as they were. (Ostavalos' vse vosprinimat', kak yest'). You aren't going to gather people and start a rebellion. We were used to living according to the situation, according to the circumstances (my privykli zhit' po obstoyatel'stvam, po usloviyam) (...) If there was no water, we'd find it.... no food, we would find some. (...) when conditions changed for all of us and that meant we had to change our approach to life...*

**Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB**

This idea of ‘living according to circumstances’ reflects a view of how the Russian people have adapted to the challenging external conditions they have found themselves in throughout the twentieth century. There is an element of stoic pride in how ordinary Russians are imagined to have ‘endured’ these transitions. This idea of the Russians as tough and adaptable survivors is

clearly transmitted across to younger respondents in their assessment of the national character. One claimed that *'the Russian is unique in that he can adapt to any environment, to any system. Putting it crudely, he is like a cockroach that can survive any situation, I chose 'cockroach' because they could even make it through a nuclear war, right?'* (Evgeny (30) sales manager construction materials, SPB). This sardonic humour is perhaps another part of the cultural intimacy involved in representations of national identity: *'Survival is a very telling point for Russia. We have endured everything here and take it all with humour. Because if you try and live here without a sense of humour you will just end up six fucking feet under! (laughs)'* (Zakhar (29) Manager in export company, SPB).

Younger respondents also expressed admiration for their parents who, in spite of the enormous difficulties, battled on stoically without complaining in the late Soviet period and 1990's. Rather than criticizing any of this as 'passivity', this emphasises the grit and toughness of people who silently accepted the challenges of the reform era, and 'made it through':

*My dad worked two jobs at the same time and on top of that managed to graduate and look after two children. I don't know if there was some Soviet romanticism then but I never heard them complaining about any particular people or saying that someone had caused the country's collapse. They accepted the all reforms in silence; I don't even know how to explain it!*

Marina (25) Language teacher, NN

It appears this positive spin on 'apolitical' behaviour is somewhat mythical in style. According to this version, Russians lived through the unpredictable and traumatic years of reform, collapse and disorder with stoicism and strength. Instead of worrying, whining or protesting about politics, they simply 'rolled up their sleeves' and 'got on with it'.

Thus, people had a simple choice: *Either you go and work in government and make reforms yourself or you adjust to the current situation (...) Sitting by the kitchen stove and whining (...) this is not a way out (...) What difference does it make (...) if you want to work and earn money?* (Pavel (27) export-import business, SPB). It appears much of this sentiment is still reproduced in Russian families today,

explaining why many prefer to turn their backs on politics and ‘get on with life’. The idea that participating in politics is a ‘waste of time’ unless you enter the ‘elite’ fits well with longer narratives of family behaviour in perestroika and the nineties. As we will see below, such sentiment is also on display in attitudes to the political opposition and the Bolotnaya protests of 2011-12.

While this positive view of endurance and stoicism is clearly endorsed by many, it is important to note that a large number of respondents robustly contested the causes of Russian ‘*terpenie*’, rejecting the sense that it is ‘good’, ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ for Russians to be this way. Instead, this trait was couched in terms of passivity and paternalism, something holding Russia back, a historically rooted ailment that must be remedied. This often entailed playing up the mindless and hopeless aspect of this passivity, in ways that represented the Russian people in ways not dissimilar to cattle:

*The Russian people are very patient (terpelivyy). You can leech off them, you can beat them, torment them (iztyazat’), they will put up with it all (...) They just sigh and say: “Everything will work out” or “we will survive” (Vse samo ili my perezvivem). My parents endured and sighed in precisely this way.*

**Marina(29) Manager in Software Company, SPB**

Portraying Russians as ‘inert’ or ‘passive’ was also done with reference to the negative legacy Soviet rule had on the Russian mentality. As people were forced to ‘*endure all these experiments on them*’ and ‘*this endurance (terpenie) is already something on the genetic level*’ making the Russians a ‘*very inert people*’ (Pavel, (58) IT specialist. NN). The Soviet system created people determined to be ‘*layabouts*’ as more ‘*entrepreneurial people were gotten rid of by the machine of socialism*’ and those ready to ‘*work as a functionary in some office*’ were encouraged to the top positions (Sergei (40) Marketing Department, SPB).

This brings us to a second feature of this Russian passivity: paternalism. For some, Russian passivity is part of a ‘*slave-like mentality*’ and the need to ‘*look up to the ruler*’ as ‘*when you are told one hundred thousand times repeatedly that “Stalin is the best” (...) this becomes entrenched in the consciousness*’

(Olga (26) Costume designer, SPB). For some, this paternalism is rooted in pre-revolutionary and Soviet political culture leading to a dependent and paternalistic relationship between people and state. Here this historical legacy is summed up by the point *‘the majority want some kind of father. The Tsar was a father, then Stalin was a father – they were all fathers upon which you could rely’* and that people, even today, are still not *‘ready to take responsibility for the country’* and participate in politics; they prefer to rely on a ‘father’ (Timur (26) Postgraduate researcher, Moscow). This reluctance to take more responsibility and the preference for delegating difficult choices to an ‘authoritative figure’ (*avtoritet*) leaves Russians submerged in a massive collective ‘we’ rather than developing a sense of ‘self’ and personal responsibility:

*I think that people on the inside are not morally ready to lead an independent life (...) instead the majority are drawn to some kind of authoritative figure (avtoritet) that can decide everything and, what’s more, give things. And if he doesn’t give now, we will be patient (my poterpim). On the other hand we remain within a huge ‘We’ where, unfortunately, there is no place for ‘I’*

Nikita (42) Ventilation system salesman, NN

Thus, we find a split: a section of respondents criticize paternalism’s pernicious effects on the national character while, in contrast, a significant number defend the concentration of power into the hands of the President as a ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ evolution for Russia. Lying between these two positions were those respondents who were essentially pragmatic, uncommitted to either democratic principles or shifting to authoritarianism, merely interested in a system that ‘works’.

This three way division in stances was visible in attitudes to the Bolotnaya protests of 2011-12, an event still relatively fresh in the memory at the time of fieldwork. The first group, which was largely made up of younger respondents, took a positive view of the protesters and generally shared the critical views of paternalism shown above. They argued the Russian political system was no longer democratic and the concentration of power into fewer and fewer hands

meant *'Russia is basically a monarchy now (...) as there is only one ruler'* (Alexei (23) Computer programmer, NN). Others referred to the idea of a 'sham democracy', as *'in Russia there are democratic institutions but not democracy'* and in important matters *'democratic principles are not respected'* (Timur (26) Postgraduate researcher, Moscow). The key point is that democratic procedures are subverted and manipulated to fit the prerogatives of the government. According to this version Russians live in a *'presidential republic'* with *'one-party rule'* where *'parliament only exists as a nominal thing (...) all the parties follow the same line with very few significant differences, we don't have an opposition as such. (...) and all decisions are made by the president'* (Olga (26) Costume designer, SPB). Respondents with such views took a more positive view of the protests as an indicator people were ready to *'take responsibility (...) stand up for their point of view and go out on the street'* (Timur (26) Postgraduate researcher, Moscow).

In stark contrast to this were those respondents who rejected concerns about the demise of Russian democracy by offering well-known arguments such as Russia is not ready for 'full' democracy, there is, in any case, no 'ideal democracy' for Russia to adopt or Russia has a 'special path' and need not measure up to other countries:

*As for those who criticise the current system because it has no democracy at all, I want to say the following: Russia is moving according to her own path. (Rossiya idet po svoemu puti). She is not similar to anyone else, everything is a bit different here, we have our own type of democracy that is not like the West. (...) I cannot say this is good or bad. We live and survive as we can...*

Marta (54) retired, SPB

Thus, here we find a strong Slavophile flavour, although, as we will see in the next chapter, this is often lacks a deeper ideological basis. Nonetheless, many believe Putin has developed 'democracy with a Russian flavour', one where power is delegated to a strong leader and strong state. Much of this resonates with the kind of democracy described in the concept of 'Delegative Democracy': *This is a democracy with a strong rule (Eto demokratiya sil'noy*

*vlasti). I mean a special kind of democracy with strengthened powers, one that develops under the influence of this state power (Lubov (43) Private tutor, SPB).* Thus, this democratic-authoritarian hybrid is not popularly viewed as a dictatorship as such. Instead, it is viewed as *‘the democratic choice of society as a whole (...) the majority, especially those who feel happy living here, feel a degree of reassurance in passing their internal rights/powers (vnutrennikh polnomochiy) to the highest leadership (Vladislav (28) Postdoctoral researcher Middle Eastern Studies, NN).* These respondents were not embarrassed about Russia’s increasing lack of resemblance to a democratic state. In fact, they openly praised the shift toward a more paternalistic and caring style of rule. Again the important idea is delegating ‘supreme power’ to Putin and leaving things for him to solve:

*The population needs protection and the state must somehow take care of it. Russian people have always been pro-state (gosudarstvennikami). We have always had relatively strong authorities and a monarch. Really at heart the Russian person is a monarchist. We can’t have democracy in the Western understanding of the word in Russia. That is not our path. Putin is the president but Russians view him as a Tsar. I am sure that more than half of Russians would give Putin supreme power (verkhovnuyu vlast') – let him be the monarch.*

**Oleg (49) Construction site foreman, SPB**

Thus, two groups of respondents are in direct conflict over the question of whether paternalism is ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’ for Russia. It can be argued that in conditions of more open and unrestricted political debating and electioneering, this division would come to the fore quite quickly.

On the other hand, the final (and largest in size) group of respondents tended to take the middle road in attitudes to the political system and the Bolotnaya protests. They tended to view the Bolotnaya protests as irrelevant to their everyday lives, something happening ‘far away’ from them and downplayed the importance of election rigging as *‘United Russia and Putin would have won without this anyway. He is the most worthy ruler and there is nothing better on offer. As long as everything is peaceful in the country and I have a normal and well-paid job, I won’t be too worried about the State Duma (Boris (22) Computer*

Programmer, NN). This pragmatic sentiment means putting a premium on effectiveness over adherence to democratic norms or any ideological commitments to the ‘purity’ of a political system. One respondent, who described himself as *‘an advocate of democracy, rather than any totalitarian system’*, still defended the slide toward authoritarianism as *‘what is in Russia’s interests is a good standard of living, social protection and improvement in life quality. If these things are getting better, that means it (the system MB) is fine’* (Valery (40) Business Development, NN).

On the one hand, this can be understood as pragmatism. For some respondents, however, this was also a case of ‘paternalist longings’ (Gudkov 2015: 138). This was often connected to memories of living in the Brezhnev period, where the state offered certain guarantees for citizens provided they disengaged from politics.<sup>94</sup> An excellent example of such sentiment can be found in Ivan, who was a miner in the late Soviet period. Below he underlines that, in terms of everyday life, the Soviet social contract was simple: *‘You studied, graduated, worked. (...) you made money, you bought things. You had to work: that was the main principle, the ideology of the USSR, every Soviet citizen had to work, that was the only red line, everything else, including political aspects, didn’t enter the mind of a Soviet person’* (Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB).

Indifference to politics is part of a ‘deal’: the people are allowed to disengage from politics and delegate this to a political class. In return, a stable and secure living environment is created. This boils down to a basic stance that many respondents seemed to take toward political behaviour even today: *For us it does not matter, what kind of regime it is. (...) Just let us peacefully work and live well!* (Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB). This is a longing for the days when the individual could be indifferent to ‘what kind of regime we have’ and get on with a ‘normal life’. In essence, ‘Democracy’ is more of a background or secondary matter and not equated with ‘freedom’, which, for these respondents, is more tied up with being able to live a ‘normal’ life in terms of education, economic growth and career opportunities, the chance to accumulate and spend money, travel abroad, buy property and plan a future. As long as these

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<sup>94</sup> This has been referred to as the ‘Little Deal’; an unwritten arrangement between the state and the people according to which citizens gained more freedom to earn/consume (even in semi-illegal ways) and were less burden with ideological demands or mass mobilization campaigns (Millar 1985).

‘freedoms’ are in place, politics can be safely ignored and left to the politicians. This means judging the system by its effectiveness rather than other categories:

*S: It's just that we judge the system in terms of its effectiveness. (...) We have lived through the decades and know how bad it was and how it has gotten better.*

*V: The living standards here are pretty high. I mean we feel like free people, we can do things, take decisions, go abroad, start some kind of business, I mean, the point is we live in a normal way (normal'no zhivem).*

*S: You don't feel like they say there is a police state, I don't feel any pressure.*

*V: We are not under surveillance.*

**Vlad (26) Marketing, NN, Sergei (29) Business Development, NN**

Such sentiment reveals much about how many Russians view this current system; it is not an almighty leviathan asserting its authority in all walks of everyday life, but system that puts things in decent order so that people can get on with life. Respondents in this group tended to suggest that *‘now people have the chance to do what they want, think how they want’* and that, comparatively speaking, there is sufficient freedom and it is only *‘some extreme-minded people (ul'tra-nastroyennyye lyudi) who think that freedom of speech in Russia is suppressed, that we are under the jackboot (...) that there is no democracy’* (Dmitri (28) Actor, SPB).

Overall then, there is a significant divide on how to view ‘passive’ Russian political behaviour, some viewing it as ‘normal’, others ‘abnormal’. For some, Passivity is a ‘normal’ way to behave in a Russian context, while, for others, it reflects the refusal of ordinary Russians to ‘take responsibility’ in politics and prefer an ‘abnormal’ paternalistic style. This split on versions of ‘normality’ is a recurring theme throughout this chapter. It is visible again in the different ways respondents displayed their common widespread antipathy to state institutions and structures, which are seen as parasitic and corrupt. It is to this we now turn.



### **Part three: Portrayals of the current Russian state system (*gosudarstvennii stroi*) and ruling class (*pravyashii sloi*)**

An interesting feature of discussions on everyday life of respondents was critical comments about the ‘abnormal’ performance of the state and the ruling elite in Russia today. This is also observed in quantitative polling that show that, with the exclusions of the Presidency, the army and the Orthodox Church, institutions and the state bureaucracy in general are not held in high regard in Russia.<sup>95</sup> While this basic sentiment cut across class, age and profession, what differentiated respondents was how they framed this ‘abnormality’. While older respondents did this with reference to the Soviet state, younger respondents focused how these deficiencies deviated from the idea of a ‘normal’ modern state in the twenty-first century. With regards older respondents, the Soviet state apparatus and party elite were often portrayed as having good intentions, a positive force working to the benefit of the people. The Soviet system offered ‘*more socially orientated laws (sotsial’nykh zakonov)*’; it ‘*let people live (lyudyam davali zhit)*’ and ‘*gave lots of good things to the many*’ rather than just ‘*to the few*’, whereas today the ‘*state makes more money out of the people than it gives back*’ (Denis (41) Journalist, NN). The contemporary Russian state is often presented as predatory in its very nature; its ultimate aim is not to support or nurture but to ‘trick’, ‘rob’ and ‘cheat’. The basic equation here is that state officials plot and scheme to discover new ways of harvesting the people’s resources for personal gain. As one respondent put it ‘*over the last fifteen years, and always the strategy is the same. It is for the state to win at the expense of the population. So, for us, in any case, it never works out well.*’ (Galina (40) Sociology department, NN).

Another common way to highlight the malfunctioning performance of the current Russian state was to talk about everyday instances when state officials deviate from expected norms in their search for sources of self-enrichment. One area causing common rancour were multifarious attempts to extort bribes, whether by doctors for medical treatment, nursery administrators to secure a

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<sup>95</sup> Statistics from January 2014 show that when asked the question ‘how would you characterize the current authorities (*vlast*)?’ 35% saw them as ‘acting in own interests’ and 27% as ‘thieving and Mafia-like’. The figures for more positive characterizations were lower, with 14% seeing them as ‘democratic’ and ‘law-based’ (*pravovaya*) and a paltry 2% describing them as ‘fair and close to the people’ [http://msps.su/files/2014/12/Gudkov\\_Golizono27-11-2014.pdf](http://msps.su/files/2014/12/Gudkov_Golizono27-11-2014.pdf)

The ratings of trust for Russian institutions in 2016 ranked as following: the President 74%, the army 60%, organs of state Security 46%, Church 43%. At the bottom were the regional authorities 22%, the legal system 22%, Russian banks 15%, Political parties 12% and business 11% <https://www.levada.ru/2017/10/12/institutsionalnoe-doverie-3/>

place for one's child or traffic police to speed up their meddlesome 'inspections'. Thus, the corrupt representatives of the state act as a constant break on people's attempts to get by in life. As the respondent below suggests, it is venal and predatory officialdom that stops him from having a 'normal' family life:

*if I want to start my own business, then the tax inspectors, fire safety control people and public health officials will suddenly appear out of nowhere. You need all these stamps, papers, you need to give bribes. Bureaucrats in Russia – this is our great misfortune (...) We need only one reform here. Let the Russian people earn money in peace, don't limit us, don't rob us! I would be able to feed myself and my family if they did this....*

**Oleg (49) Construction site foreman, SPB**

These images of a corrupt state sucking money out of ordinary working people is reinforced by common-sense understandings of Russia's contemporary elite as alien, unpatriotic and interested only in money. The state bodies are seen as money-making opportunities, as *'state power is a business'* and *'talented people, who otherwise could prove a success in the business world, instead go to work for the state because that is the simplest and shortest pathway to make money'* (Sergei (40) Marketing Department, SPB).

Below a respondent expresses alienation from Russia's ruling class (*pravyashii sloi*) who are seen to benefit from the current economic model as it allows them fulfil their key goal: to enjoy a prosperous Western standard of living. Given that this, rather than any patriotic loyalty to Russia, is their aim, it is only to be expected they will pack up and leave if things get tough:

*...most of all the ruling elite (pravyashii sloi) is made up of people who have done well out of this economic model and (...) are orientated towards the West. (...) they have certain reserves and, when the time comes, they are ready to go off and live there. They don't see any need to build or develop here, or to think of the overall good of the country (...) this is like a comprador elite (...) I don't think many of them really care about the welfare/prosperity (blagosostoyanii) of people living in Russia.*

Thus, older respondents revealed alienation from the state and elite viewing the ‘abnormality’ of current life (a predatory state, corruption and a venal elite) through the Soviet frame of ‘normality’ whereby the ‘normal’ situation is a powerful paternalistic state that provides people with the basics they need. The respondent below reproduces the powerful sense of abandonment echoed by many older respondents from the last Soviet youth generation:

*I can't say anything bad about the Soviet Union. I had a happy, peaceful childhood, a whole load of possibilities in life. Everything [was done] for a person (...) Now a person is left one on one against the elements (s etoy stikhiyey), left to the mercies of these officials, to this corruption, to face just about any kind of thing. But before we had a fine-tuned system, everything was there for a person but not anymore...*

Galina (40) Sociology department, NN

In contrast to how older respondents criticised the current political system, younger respondents focused on how this corruption and venality did not fit in with the principles of a ‘normal’ functioning modern state. Younger respondents picked out a variety of ways in which those working in the state apparatus were seen to violate the principles of the modern state. One was a central standard concept of the modern state – those working in the state apparatus are paid by taxpayers to do a job and they are expected to be competent: *‘The state is the management and the country is the company – thus the management should not only work for its benefit, but to the benefit of its workers, to benefit ordinary people’* (Alexander (25) Business development manager, SPB). One respondent, an architect working on a government contract for the Governor of Penza, claimed most of his entourage was *‘not competent, openly rude, openly greedy’* and interested only *‘the goal of personal enrichment’*: even if *‘for appearances sake they will say a few clever words, nonetheless they take bribes all the same’* (Pyotr (29) Architect, NN).

Another example of how the current elite and state system violate the principle of the modern state is in the idea of equality before the law. Instead, as the

respondents below explain, there is one law for ‘them’, another for ‘us.’ This allows the state to rob the people as they wish, with no real punishment and the law playing a merely decorative role in people’s lives. Thus, *‘those at the top, those oligarchs and deputies, they sit about stealing loads of money, they can, but we are not allowed’*. Instead the ordinary person is at the mercy of the powerful and *‘can be put in jail for any old thing’* (Elena (29) Accountant, Dzershinsk, NN; Inna (28) factory worker, Dzershinsk, NN). Both generational groups, albeit with differing reference frames, portray the Russian state system and corresponding political elite/establishment in seriously negative terms, revealing a lack of trust in state officials, whose vulture-like behaviour is aimed at self-enrichment. This ties in well with quantitative sociological data on the lack of trust Russians have for a variety of state institutions, with low figures for key bodies such as the courts and the state procurator’s office, the State Duma and local government.<sup>96</sup>

One respondent offered an interesting improvised characterization of life in Russia today that rather neatly summarises the way the state system (*gosudarstvennii stroi*) was perceived by many respondents. Describing Russia’s egregiously unfair and dangerous system, he employed the metaphor of an anthill with a large sugar cube at its peak:

*I would say our system (stroi) is like... (pause)... an anthill, on the top of which lies a little pack of sugar. There is a small hole in the little pack of sugar and sometimes grains of sugar start falling out, and then the ants run over and take bits for themselves and use them. But then at the same time there is a boy with a magnifying glass and those who take too long or go too far in taking these bits, these ants are burned alive by the sun’s rays (via the magnifying glass MB). I, for example, sit at the bottom of the anthill. To be honest, I don’t really feel like climbing up there for the sugar.*

Stepan (22) Physics student, SPB

The respondent places himself in the above picture as at the bottom, disengaged, disconnected, with no desire to climb up and ‘take a piece of the

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<sup>96</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/>

sugar'. If we turn to the 'boy with the magnifying glass', it is likely the respondent is referring to the very highest branches of the state.

This brings us to how President Vladimir Putin is imagined as the leader of the country, a figure who appears to enjoy high levels of legitimacy and trust levels in public opinion. Some respondents spoke of an '*ambiguous view of the authorities*'; combining '*respect*' for the president with the knowledge that '*no matter how he tries there is no freedom, you always come up against an apparatus of officials and ministers, that you cannot bypass*' (Eva (26) Unemployed, university graduate, NN). This imagery of a trustworthy Putin at the top, the hopeful masses at the bottom, separated by a venal bog of unreliable officials in the middle, was often reproduced in interviews. This idea has a long history in Russian history found in the saying 'The Tsar is good but the Boyars are wicked'.<sup>97</sup> In one sense, supporting Putin as leader is due to a feeling of intense alienation from the rest of the state structures and the hope that he will somehow 'drain the swamp' and lead the nation to better times.

Thus, an important part of what may be termed the 'pro-Putin' consensus is the way idealised positive views of Putin's personal qualities promote him to a special place in political terms: a person who is 'one of us', the embodiment of desirable qualities. This is reinforced by representations of the Russian national character as in need of a leader with such qualities and the mass internalization, reproduction and transmission of Putinist foundational myths. It also seems the pro-Putin consensus is strongly influenced by memories of Russia from 1985 to 1999, which remembers the country and its population as helpless and abandoned, and in need of rescue. The sense that Putin embodies the nation and leads a 'government of saviours' is strong. On the other hand, it is important, however, not to take this as suggestive of monolithic unity in Russian society; many respondents saw political inactivity and passivity as negative trends holding Russia back and, thus, do not 'buck' the Putin consensus. They tend to describe the popularity of Putin in terms of 'Other' Russians, those of different or lower social background. We will now turn in more detail to how respondents contested the Putin consensus.

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<sup>97</sup> [http://mizugadro.mydns.jp/t/index.php/Царь\\_добрый\\_а\\_бояре\\_злые](http://mizugadro.mydns.jp/t/index.php/Царь_добрый_а_бояре_злые)

#### Part four: Contesting the ‘Putin consensus’

A diverse range of respondents offered ample evidence they had deconstructed or demythologised many of the factors explaining Putin’s popularity. One area of active deconstruction was Putin’s marketing of himself as a tough-talking leader who will ‘*snuff them out in the latrines*’ and restore Russia on the world stage. Here Putin’s claim to be ‘a fighter for Russia’s status in the modern world’ could be viewed a kind of hollow ‘populist’ performance, as, in this view, Russia has no ‘real’ military or economic power. The Putin effect, then, is akin to a kind of narcotic ‘doping’: something the people can take to feel good or strong about themselves:

*this is often done in a populist style, such as the thing with Crimea now, it is like, in order to maintain his own image as a kind of champion of Russia’s position in the modern world. Even if, actually, we all understand that we have no real position. Not in a military sense, not in an economic one either. But the people all the same want to feel strong because for seventy years they were accustomed to feeling like a power (derzhavoi) with which the surrounding world had to reckon.*

Ilia (46) Import-Export Business owner, NN

This idea of a ‘feeling strong’ and ‘narcotic effect’ can be found in critiques of Putin’s domestic policies. While within the family it is ‘*basically understood that nothing concrete, no changes at all, have happened in our lives: wages are still pretty much low, he isn’t raising them, he doesn’t really pay attention to this*’, on the other hand, Putin is respected for once again making Russia ‘*a strong power (derzhava) on the international stage*’ (Katya (22) Student Politics, NN). Thus, foreign policy initiatives have a compensatory effect allowing people to accept the lack of visible improvement in their everyday lives.

Another means of contesting the Putin consensus was to refer to the actual current state of the country that the President has ‘risen from her knees’: As the respondent below indicates, a wide number of deficiencies are clear in everyday life, ranging from corruption and uneven development to plummeting educational and healthcare standards. As we saw earlier in criticism of the

Russian state, such views are far from rare. Here the respondent clearly does not look back to the nineties anymore in framing normality. Instead, Putin's domestic policies are seen as a failure in the context of a 'normal country in the twenty-first century':

*Putin's foreign policy is one thing, his domestic policies are something else. I don't like the domestic policies (...) the thieving, the patronage networks, that brotherhood (vorovstvo, pokrovitel'stvo, pobratimstvo) (...) Power is centralised, all the money is in Moscow. This is a bad thing. The regions are not developed. The villages were in a bad state and have remained so. The healthcare system is falling apart (Meditsina razvalivayetsya). Teachers used to make 10,000 a month, and they still do today. Education has hit rock bottom... (Obrazovaniye na nule) (...) Our rockets and satellites are falling from the sky. Our Lada factories still can't produce normal cars. (...) In terms of technology, the country is a good fifty years behind. (...) we are not developing (...) we can't go on like this, just being addicted to the drug of oil.*

**Marina(29) Manager in Software Company, SPB**

Focusing on the idea that Putin's domestic policies have failed in terms of the standards of the modern world, this clearly contradicts the foundational myth of 'Putin as saviour' by claiming his attempts to 'rescue' Russia have not produced the desired results. For those taking the developed world as reference point, Russia can still be viewed as a 'shambles'.

When we look at those respondents who still employ the frame of the 'abnormal' nineties, however, Putin's achievements are put in a different light. Here Putin's domestic policies are seen to have returned normality and 'minimal' standards in areas such as pension provisions, the basic functioning of the state or the orderly payment of wages. Thus, from the point of view of someone living in the lower-income end of Russian society, Putin has returned a certain minimum in terms of living standards that corresponds to the Soviet norm that preceded it. In doing this he has delivered, where previous reform efforts have failed:

*Why? The people love stability and don't want sharp changes (Narod lyubit stabil'nost' i ne khochet rezkikh izmeneniy). There have already been so many changes over the last century and they have always told us 'just hold on a bit longer and things will get better' (poterpite yeshche nemnogo i vse budet khorosho). Now our people, who remember well the Soviet past, they see something good today. They can afford more things. Some kind of social fairness has appeared (sotsial'naya spravedlivost'), they don't withhold wage payments like in the Yeltsin years. He has established order, it is shaky and unsteady, but it is order. And the people value this. (...) there is pretty much still a minimal welfare state (minimal'noye sotsial'noye gosudarstvo).*

Leonid (45) Religious history lecturer, NN

Thus, we find that the use of differing frames of normality can lead to differing evaluations of Putin's domestic policy. Those still appraising Putin in terms of how he has regained something resembling late Soviet stability draw different conclusions from those looking out onto neighbouring European states, where different standards of political and economic development are on display. This split re-emerges in the chapter on Geopolitics and how respondents have differing ideas of what it means to be a 'great power'. It can be argued that this split in normative frames will be important as the years pass and generational shifts continue. As more Russians travel and communicate with the outside world, it may be the generational dynamic will work against the Putin consensus as the lived memory of the nineties as a frame of reference becomes less salient.

Another visible division in respondents concerns those who actively subscribe to the pro-Putin myths, and those who distance themselves from this, preferring to explain Putin's popularity in terms of a bonding that has occurred between Putin and 'the lower orders'. In St. Petersburg, a variety of respondents claimed it was provincial Russia that supports the President most. In comparison to the big cities who take a more critical view, it is the '*hinterland (glubinka) that really loves Putin*' as people there '*don't really appreciate the delights of democracy*' and '*pretty much still live as they did in the USSR*' (Julia

(47) Assistant in film set production, SPB).



According to this view of Putinism, the rough language and macho posturing employed by the President is largely an appeal to the ‘lower classes’. In other words, Putin’s ‘*not accidental use of criminal jargon (blatnuyu leksiku)*’ such as ‘*snuff them out in the latrines*’ (*‘mochit’ v sortire*) or ‘*hang them by the balls*’ (*‘povesit’ za yaytsa*)’ caters to the ‘*most base emotions that exist in the people*’. These resemble the common language of ‘*criminal underworld jokes*’ that a ‘*certain part of the population loves*’ (Semyon (54) psychologist, SPB). It is clear that cultural, educational, regional and generational difference plays a serious role in the reception of the Putin myth and image. A large number of younger and older respondents reproduced the myths of Putin’s popularity with some heavy irony. These respondents underline that such myths are only accepted by ‘stupid’ or ‘backward’ Russian masses, who have reverted to the role played by the Russian peasantry of the nineteenth century: they revere the Tsar as the protector of the people and look to him to solve all the country’s problems.

The idea of the ‘*Tsar-father who will take care of us*’ (*tsar’-batyushka, kotoryy zabolitsya obo vseh nas*) is a return to a long-running political tradition: the ‘*tough*’, ‘*demanding*’ and ‘*severe*’ Tsar, who ‘*who frowns and speaks in a confident tone*’ ensures that ‘*the well-being of the people will continue to grow*. (laughs) (Mikhail (24), IT support, SPB). In abstracting the Russian people in this way, these respondents replay pre-revolutionary discourses; they take the role of the Europeanised urban intellectual, the Russian people are the Russian peasant, an object of contempt and, at times, fear. Thus, the various ways that respondents unpacked and criticized myths about the Russian mentality, Putin’s image and performance as leader, reveal a significant degree of polarisation that is not represented in sociological polling claiming 85% support levels for Putin. This polarisation can also be traced in attitudes to the Russian trait of ‘endurance’ (*terpenie*), which some saw as a pernicious paternalist streak. Attitudes to Russia’s ‘information war’ offer further evidence of cross-generational and cultural divisions emerging that may prove problematic for the future popularity of the current political *status quo*.

### *Understanding the 'Information War'*

One topic that provided much evidence of generational tension is the 'Information War', a term that describes the intensification of state media propaganda in both Russia and Ukraine today. The first point to make about the 'information war' is that a very small number of respondents saw this as a 'normal' or 'natural' thing. In cases where respondents held this viewpoint, the most typical approach was to present the topic as a non-issue. A common argument was to claim information wars are a natural '*instrument for any conflict*' (Valery (40) Business Development, NN) and that '*all governments in all countries distort facts*' (Boris (22) Computer Programmer, NN). Russia in this case is no exception.

Most respondents, however, saw the changes in the media environment as 'abnormal' in one way or another. One way was the sense of confusion this caused, leading many to doubt all information to be lies on both sides and conclude that holding a clear political position is untenable or pointless. The lack of '*objectivity*' or a '*middle road in media*' makes it '*hard to say where the truth is*' and leaves one '*at a loss*' (Eva (26) Unemployed, university graduate, NN). Here we find evidence of how the information war creates conditions that neutralize critical thought. After all, if one *can't believe any sources*' as they are understood to be '*blatant propaganda*' then all that one is left with is a '*total muddle (polneyshaya nerazberikha) in the mass media*' (Anastasia (21) Economics Student, NN).

Another disorientating aspect here was that, for many, the Information War has led them to avoid political conversations with friends in such a heightened atmosphere of polarised and aggressive political discourse. Many respondents was offered their own anecdotal evidence as to how the media influenced discord, usually by introducing aggressive polemics into discussions:

*We try not to discuss politics with friends. Because conflicts can start from this. Politics is one thing, friendship another. A conflict even started with my parents but I managed to say in time 'let's not talk about this.'* (...)

*Everyone watches various television programmes and there are lots of radical opinions on them. That is the source of the conflict.*

Marina(29) Manager in Software Company, SPB

Here a key factor was the divide in media consumption between those following state media in TV and radio, and those preferring the Internet. This ties in with sociological data suggesting Russian society is divided into media consumption groups, each with rather distinct views. On the one hand we have the ‘party of the television’ (*partita televisora*) – those who watch Channel One (*Perviy Kanal*) and other state media, on the other we have the ‘party of the internet’ (*partiya interneta*).<sup>98</sup>

This split may render the increased frequency of state media propaganda in the ‘information war’ counter-productive; instead of uniting diverse groups of Russians it seems to win over the older age groups at the expense of alienating younger audiences. A large proportion of younger respondents claimed they did not consume state media as a matter of principle and preferred internet-based sources. One younger respondent describing the television as a very different information space that has undergone a ‘*return to a Soviet style*’ where ‘*they “make enemies” for us*’ and announce ‘*There he is guys, attack!*’ In this context the respondent claims ‘*you feel like closing your ears when you see the news; at least then the pictures won’t tell a lie*’ (Yaroslav (23), IT Student and small businessman, NN).

This view of the Information War as a return to Soviet-style propaganda is expanded on by the respondent below who has observed a common theme: the morally upright home country is contrasted with the degenerate West delivered in reports delivered with a tone of ‘malicious joy’. What is important here is that this kind of media lacks credibility for both him and his mother:

*Every time I see the news (...) they show only good things happening here, while in the West it is all bad. When the riots happened in the USA between*

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<sup>98</sup> One large scale poll asked the two groups to choose between two options - ‘freedom is a thing without which a person’s life loses meaning’ and ‘the main thing in life is material well-being, freedom is secondary.’ The results for the party of the internet were 75% to 25% in favour of freedom, while for the party of the television it was a 51-49 split (Gorshkov et al 2013: 120).

*the blacks and whites (the Ferguson unrest of August 2014 MB) it was presented here as if America was about to fall apart. My mother was watching it and said 'Hmm, this is like the 70's and 80's' (...) like when the TV show 'vremya' talked about party congresses, and the successes of Soviet production and, meanwhile in the West, everything in that degrading bourgeois society was bad.*

**Evgeny (30) sales manager construction materials, SPB**

A variety of respondents viewed this kind of media reporting as something 'not for them'. Older respondents also viewed television media as something designed for the older generation, such as their over-60 parents. This kind of thinking suggests the information war has created a new category in Russian society: those who, are happy (as they were in the Soviet period) to believe what they are told. Here the simple binaries of 'we are good and they are bad' are viewed as soothing for the older generation:

*Lots of people live like this. Take, for example, my mother. She is old now, 72. She is a Soviet person. She is used to believe what they say on the television and what is printed in certain newspapers. The television propaganda pushes one line – 'we are Russians (rossiyanine) and we are all correct, but the Ukrainians are shits (kozly) They've done this and that to us, but we are good people.' And they believe that.*

**Denis (41) Journalist, NN**

Interestingly, those belonging to the 'party of the internet' could discuss their identity in very positive terms, as people who have been liberated from the grip of state media and, rather than being forced into one-sided positions. They live outside of the Information War, receiving information on current affairs from bloggers, independent writers and other non-systemic media. This naturally leads to conflict in discussions between those who rely on state media:

*One key feature of my circle and my generation is that we are the people of the internet, we sit at our computers, we don't watch state-run information channels (...) I often speak with my mother and she only watches federal TV channels, therefore her views are pretty one-sided, (...) I try to explain*

*things, to help her understand more (...) but in the end we have just started to talk less, (...) It is one of my pet hates, when a person has one-sided views, I try not to think and speak that way.*

Alexei (23) Computer programmer, NN

Many respondents offered anecdotes of intergenerational conflict in the immediate family, reporting the frustration and discord bred by state media, which creates a rift between parents and children. Almost all of this reporting was one-way: respondents lamented the one-sided positions of their older relatives. One respondent described how, on coming home to visit her parents in the midst of escalating media rhetoric in the Maidan crisis, she ‘hit a brick wall’ when trying to communicate with her father:

*I saw my father watching television non-stop. And my arguments (...) just hit some kind of brick wall. He totally believed what was being said on TV and wouldn't believe anything I said about there being other information available from other sources. He said 'they are all lying to you on that internet of yours, look at the horrible things happening on TV!'*

Sasha (28), University Lecturer in History, SPB

The emotions generated by this ‘brick wall’ could vary; below we find an example of sad sympathy and acceptance of their parents falling under the spell of one-sided aggressive propaganda. As with other respondents, she is grateful not to have ‘fallen victim’ to the information war. The implication here is that this is a misfortune that can happen to those not lucky (or educated/cultured) enough to have a healthier perspective:

*I have been observing this information war for the last six months as I lived in Crimea with my parents during this time. They watch the TV 24 hours a day (...) my parents are on the side of Russia and say 'look how Ukraine lies! Aren't they ashamed of themselves?' I don't look any worse on my parents for this (...) but thank God I am not a victim of the information war because I do not believe that two kindred (blizkikh po dukhu) peoples can just start hating one another like that. I have loads of friends in Kiev. They still invite me to visit them and my relations with them have not changed.*

Nadezhda (30) nanny, SPB

For other respondents, the sense of ‘losing’ one’s parents to the state media propaganda machine is vexing and hurtful. In one way, the Information War creates a feeling of separation between ‘thinking people’ and ‘Channel One zombies’ who rely on the TV. According to this view, *‘people who watch TV, get dumb, and that is hard to take because it means they lose their critical faculties, lose any inclination to analytical thought. (...) People find it easier to go by the path of least resistance’*. State media like Channel One target such people and *‘lie in brazen, cynical and disgustingly stupid ways’*; the hatred of state media could at times be expressed in extreme ways: *‘Channel one is full of bastards and bitches, I would spit on all their faces (...) they are causing this polarisation’* (Pyotr (29) Architect, NN).

Generalized negative representations of such ‘Channel One zombies’, whether the respondent called them this or not, were commonly reproduced. One common thread was to classify them as people of lower culture or education. There is a sense that it is only *‘very uneducated people who fall under the influence of the TV, when they are told things by Channel One, that one country is good and another bad, they believe this and with all their passion in their hearts insists on this in any conversation...’* (Stepan (22) Physics student, SPB). This ties in with a phrase that has seen increased recent usage in spoken Russia – *vatnik* – that translates literally as a ‘quilted coat’ but is slang for the masses of people who are easily pleased, as long as the fridge is stocked with pickles, vodka and bread.

The idea here is *‘the Russian person needs little other than something to eat, some beer and a colour TV’* and *‘As long as they have these things they won’t care who is in power and will do as they are told’* (Arseny (41) Business development, NN). Elaborating on the idea from his own life experience, the respondent describes a friend from a working class district (*avtozavodskii raion*) who is easily offended and, as a result, has stopped talking about politics with her. The absorption of state media propaganda has rendered her rigid and dogmatic in her views:

*I have a friend, she lives in the avtozavodsk region. She is smart but she has an avtozavodsk mentality. I wouldn’t bother discussing politics with her –*

*when I do she gets annoyed. Because everything is so black and white to her. (...) it is a formula forced upon her everyday by the television.*

Arseny (41) Business development, NN

This image of a passive and zombie-like Russian mass that cannot be reasoned with also ties in with the sections above on views of paternalism and what kind of people the Russians are and why the current system suits them. What we have seen is how people react to and negotiate the political nation ‘from below’. They do this in ways that do not show them to be ‘brainwashed’ or ‘controlled’ by the state propaganda of the Information War.

In fact we find a variety of ways that in everyday life Russians negotiate this relatively new factor and observe how it is causing polarisation and poisoning of political debate, as well as consolidating some behind the leadership. It may well be that the Information War is resulting in consequences unwanted by those in the political establishment. Rather than achieving unity it causes polarisation and bitter dispute; rather than convincing people they belong to one political nation they divide this into an ‘us’ and ‘them’ community: the enlightened ‘party of the internet’ stands in contrast to the backward, zombie-like state media consumers. On the other hand, as we will see in the next chapter, certain external mega-events such as Maidan and the Crimean annexation, whose presentation is stage-managed by state media, can often largely overcome divisions and consolidate Russian society at least on a temporary basis.

### **Conclusion**

In exploring how respondents (mis)trust and support/contest the legitimacy of the current political order, a complex equilibrium is in place. On the one hand, we have explored the key elements of the pro-Putin consensus in Russia today. Putin’s carefully crafted image as a ‘real man’ can be juxtaposed next to widely held views of Russians being ‘lazy’, ‘unrealisable’ or ‘inactive’ to explain why the President is suitable for the nation. The Putin foundational myth provides additional contextual support for this feeling and is rich in emotional language offering a narrative of redemption for a ‘ruined nation’ that

a 'government of saviors' restored to its normal state. Whatever the realities of living in Putin's Russia today, this myth, with its references to the end of *smuta* and restoration of *derzhava*, offer powerful promises of stability, order and security, appealing directly to anxieties people have in relation to what happened to Russia from 1988 to 1998. This period leaves people with little experience of a functioning democracy and little faith in its prospects. In 'delegating' more power into the President, there is a clear hope he will discipline the state and mould these to fit the needs of the people, ensuring that it becomes more responsive to the nation's goals. The President is popularly seen as the embodiment of the nation to whom there is no real alternative. He alone can be trusted to take on the nation's 'foes', be they internal or external.

In considering attitudes to political activity in the late Soviet period and we find much continuity with today's Russia; the sense of distance between people and the state that claims to rule in their name, people's lack of confidence that anything they do can affect change, a feeling that political inactivity and disengagement is 'normal'. This is supported by common memory of the reform processes as started from above and alien to ordinary people; many were satisfied by the arrangements of Brezhnev's little deal and wanted to stay out of politics. It is clear that many respondents still take the basic position of non-involvement in politics and prefer to 'take things as they come'.

This preference for the *status quo* and reluctance to risk personal participation suggest the habits and phobias of *Homo Sovieticus* live on in Russia to a significant extent. Whether one prefers to interpret this as 'stoic endurance' or 'servile passivity', there are clearly a large number who are happy to accept Putin's social contract where people ask the state to maintain the *status quo*, ensure stability and 'leave us to get on with our affairs', while providing the state, in turn, with loyalty and non-participation in politics. This arrangement bears a strong resemblance with the Brezhnev-era 'Little Deal' social contract of the late Soviet period, an equilibrium many older respondents clearly remember with fondness. Yet, it is important to note that respondents with pro-Putin stances did not paint a rosy picture of life in Russia. They highlighted stagnating living standards, poor public services and the venality, corruption and incompetence of the Russian state. They long for a return to the standards



of the Soviet state, which did so much to guarantee a safe and stable life. It appears these 'paternalistic longings' play an important role in holding the pro-Putin consensus together.

Thus, the pro-Putin consensus is not the caprice of one man and his team of spin doctors; it is something that elicits a real response among the masses and resonates with their values. Yet, the cohesion and solidarity of this majority should not be exaggerated. History has shown time and time again how the hegemonic positions of a majority within a nation can be overturned. As Yurchak (2006) noted in his ethnography of the late Soviet period, generational, social and cultural change can transform discursive conditions, causing what was once a cast-iron certainty to vanish. Putin, sixty-five at the time of writing, runs a very different Russia to the one in which he achieved his political ascendancy in 1999.

This chapter has offered some important pointers as to how the Putin consensus is contested. Firstly, we find frames of normality are very important in determining political stances. It seems more pro-Putin respondents took their 'frame of normality' to be what was 'normal' in the course of Russian history (strong leaders and order) versus what was 'abnormal' (the nineties). Those with more critical views tended to frame normality with reference to what is 'normal' for a country in the twenty-first century. This entails viewing the historical legacies leading to political passivity and paternalism in negative terms. Reliance on a 'Tsar' to solve Russia's problems and having a citizenry with a 'slave-like mentality' are seen to hold Russia back from achieving 'normality'. For this section of respondents, Soviet legacies in political behaviour are not seen as good or something to be replicated; they crave a new, 'normal', relationship between the state and people. These respondents not only actively deconstruct the foundational myth of Putin; they criticize the 'gullible' masses that swallow state propaganda. Many expressed deep scepticism over Putin's domestic policies, suggesting foreign policy initiatives only 'paper over the cracks'.

This chapter has also revealed how the Information War has caused serious polarisation of public opinion along generational and social lines. Older

respondents lamented losing their (over sixty) relatives and ‘less educated’ friends to state media channels, while younger respondents often claimed to have totally turned their backs on state media and stopped communicating with the ‘victims of state propaganda’. It may be that the intensification of state propaganda has only consolidated the very oldest of Putin’s supporters and alienated those who are younger, educated in a post-Soviet environment and able to access alternative media sources. Polarisation on frames of normality are part of deeper divisions in Russian society, divisions that could prove challenging to the further maintenance of Putin’s popularity. This results in a society of dangerous labelling. ‘*Vatniki*’ are lampooned as content with vodka, pickles and salami, representatives of a *glubinka* that is willing to live with the bare minimums. ‘Liberals’ are accused of being ‘traitors’ in the pay of the West. ‘Nationalists’ are equated with violent racism and hatred.

In this environment the only safe label is that of ‘patriot’. Yet, it may be that the hyperactive and excessive vitriol of state propaganda will devalue the status of ‘being a patriot’ in Russia today. It can be argued that such polarisation is damaging to the creation of horizontal ties across the national community. As we will see in the next chapter, one central method for overcoming these fractures is the focus on external geopolitical projects. Support for the current political configuration rests on a particular conception of the wider world. External events such as Maidan (2014) and common-sense understandings of Russia’s geopolitical role, especially the troubled relationship with the West, provide compelling reasons to suspend one’s doubts and accept that, for all its faults, the current leadership represents the best available means of securing the nation’s goals.

## Chapter Seven.

### **Russia in the world: geopolitics visions as a consolidating factor in Russian identity**

In this chapter we examine the power of geopolitical representations in Russian national identity that, when invoked, encourage strong feelings of a common ‘nation-ness’. In the view of Martin Muller (2009: 9), geopolitical identities are worthy of study because of the success they have had in ‘filling identificatory voids in times of crisis and uncertainty (...) Taking over a stabilising function, (...) becoming unifying social forces which counteract processes of fragmentation and social uprooting’. This appears to apply very clearly to Russia today, as polling shows support for the government has surged in both of Russia’s crisis moments in the post-Soviet space (Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014).<sup>99</sup> Geopolitics and foreign affairs form a vital part of the current hegemonic nationalist discourse. Here we are examining how a ‘geopolitical vision’ about one’s country’s place invokes concerns about national status and honour, as well as the sense of collective mission or national strategy (Dijink 1996). The emotional narrative of Russia’s ill-treatment at the hands of the ‘West’ clearly resonates with a wide range of respondents, regardless of age, social background or occupation. This builds upon the picture examined in the previous chapter, where the point was made that foreign affairs ‘paper over the cracks’ by offering ‘compensation’ for those who might otherwise be disgruntled with the political *status quo*.

One element of this explored in this chapter is the centrality of a Soviet-inspired template of what a ‘normal’ great power should be: self-reliant, active in world affairs and able to act as a counterweight to American unilateralism. Thus, again we find Soviet legacies playing a key role in Russian national identity and, as a result, shaping the content of the hegemonic nationalist discourse. Furthermore, this chapter also sheds further light on the ‘neo-Slavophile’ turn in discourse about Russia in the world. Interestingly, one finding in this chapter is the very limited absorption of ‘ideological’ constructs;

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<sup>99</sup> Levada Center polling following the annexation of Crimea shows that from September 2012 to 2014 the number who viewed Russia as a great power jumped by 20%, an increase likely to be connected to events in Ukraine and Syria <http://www.levada.ru/11-12-2014/68-rossiyan-schitayut-rossiyu-velikoi-derzhavoi>

even Slavophile sentiment is articulated in very pragmatic terms. As a result, I argue that the current appeal of geopolitics rests on the emotional impact of certain key events, the adoption of Soviet normative standards and the transmission of a particular narrative on relations between Russia and the West. The glaring absence in this is any ‘ism’ to justify the huge sacrifices this foreign policy direction may entail. The chapter will also show that the clearest anti-hegemonic discourse regarding this question is isolationist and employs the populist ‘Put Russians first’ nationalism discussed in chapter five. Before discussing the empirical findings, however, I will unpack some important theories on the role of geopolitics in national identity.

### **The theories behind geopolitical identities and the nation**

Geopolitics is commonly studied from the top down with a focus on state policy, the speeches of prominent figures and media coverage. This chapter examines a different part of the picture, ‘popular geopolitics’: common-sense understandings and representations of world politics at the mass level. It is worth accounting for sentiments ‘from below’ as this acts as a constraint on the geopolitical projects of elites (Hopf 2002; Tsygankov 2012; Clunan 2014). In other words, state propaganda is far more likely to be successful when it taps in to existing sentiments, fears, and feelings already present in the population. An excellent example of these connections can be found in Linda Colley’s 1992 study of British national identity from 1707. She demonstrated the salience of empire and geopolitical relationships, highlighting the importance of Britain’s ‘civilizing mission’ to the wider world in empire, as well as her conflict with Catholic France, an ‘Other’ that was portrayed as ‘superstitious, militarist, decadent and unfree’ (Colley 1992: 5).

Returning to the Russian context, it is clear that Soviet identity also owed much to the USSR’s superpower confrontation with America and her ‘internationalist’ mission in the socialist camp and the third world. Clearly, when state policy and rhetoric are in step with popular geopolitics ‘from below’, social cohesion and a degree of unity can, at least temporarily, emerge. In today’s Russia, a large part of this geopolitical identity is based on an emotionally charged and status-driven narrative on why Russia must battle for

‘parity’ with the Western powers.

As with previous chapters, much of this is supported by commonly reproduced myths and visions of normality. Referring to what is ‘normal’ helps people make sense of global politics and gives a road map for a country’s aspirations. In studying the role of ‘normality’ in Russia’s promotion of ‘mega-events’ such as the Winter Olympics in Sochi and the upcoming World Cup, Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsk (2014) identified two key thematic drivers. Firstly, normality was connected to ensuring Russia is seen as a ‘normal’ country in twenty-first century terms. Here, the aim is to achieve Russia’s ‘inclusion in the global normative standards’ and, thus, to demonstrate that Russia ‘has finished its post-1991 transition to effective statehood’ (Makarychev and Yatsk 2014: 71). This version of a ‘normal’ Russia is capable of hosting major events and can successfully compete for foreign investment.

Secondly, ‘normalisation’ is also Russia returning to a ‘normal’ great power status, rising up from the deprived status she suffered in the nineties. As Vyacheslav Morozov (2013, 2015) noted, some part of this ‘normal great power’ narrative is derived from demands for ‘parity’, ‘respect’ and ‘fairness’ within the Western-dominated world system. Here Russia’s political leadership claims to work toward a more ‘democratic’ world order based on ‘guarantees of the sovereign equality of nations’ (Morozov 2013: 20). This version of the ‘normal great power’ does not reject the principles of ‘democracy’ or ‘market’ as such; the normative terms of the West are not overturned, instead the focus is on Russia (and the other BRIC countries) improving their status within this.

In addition to visions of normality, another important framework in this chapter is the role of emotions in geopolitical identity. This involves endowing countries with human attributes; nations insult one another, they are proud or cruel, they have wicked intentions. This is also a ‘normative’ element to this; the behaviour of states can be viewed ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’ according to the expected norms of conduct. At the centre of these emotional narratives is the tortured relationship between Russian and the ‘West’. The role of the West as a constituent ‘Other’ for Russian identity has rich traditions that can be traced back to Chaadaev’s letter and the Westernisers/Slavophile debates around

Russia's perceived 'backwardness' (Tolz 2001, Greenfeld 1992). In the current period, the first decade of post-Soviet Russia revolved around attempts to achieve a 'triple transition' and move closer to the Western model of modernity. Since Putin's 2007 Munich Speech, however, Russia's flirtation with 'joining the West' was replaced by new normative standards.

In studying official Russian state discourses from 2008 to 2012, Andrei Tsygankov (2014) found that the underlying emotions on show were fear, frustration and hope, each of which enjoyed distinct phases in response to new changes in Russia's relations with the West. Other authors have also argued that emotions such as satisfaction, aspiration, and frustration should be included in the toolkit for explaining how new identities are produced and promoted (Malinova 2014a; Clunna 2009). This entails studying the national 'collective self-esteem'. In the words of Anne Clunna (2009: 28), this is formed on 'notions of the group's internal *purpose* and its *status* vis-à-vis others'. If we consider Russia's relations with the West from the perspective of group identity, the key emotional driver is to achieve a new status, one more fitting with the group's internal purpose.

Much of this chapter resonates with writings on '*ressentiment*': which Olga Malinova (2014a: 292) defined as 'a psychological state resulting from feelings of repressed envy and hate (existential envy) and the impossibility of satisfying these feelings'. This dynamic can be seen in Russia's search for equality with the West, alongside changing conditions that seem to make achieving this harder. In a Nietzschean sense, *ressentiment* is about the transfer of negative feelings around one's own failures or inadequacies toward an external scapegoat (Nietzsche 1994). Thus, feelings of inferiority, for example over Russia's continued 'backwardness' or 'failure' to join the West, can be vanquished and blame can be assigned to an external 'evil': the pernicious 'West'.

While visions of 'normality' and emotional narratives about the West play an important role, we cannot capture the energy of geopolitical identities if we ignore the role of events. As we noted in chapter one, nationalism is discursive formation; a fluid phenomenon that reacts to events on the ground (Brubaker et

al 2006; Billig 1995; Bessinger 2002; Calhoun 1995). Michael Billig argued that nationalism goes through 'hot' and 'banal' phases. In the 'hot' phase, nationalism is dynamic and game-changing; large numbers of people turn to the idea of the nation in order to 'make sense of problems or predicaments, to articulate affinities and affiliations, to identify commonalities and connections, to frame stories and self-understandings' (Brubaker et al. 2006: 12). The 'banal' phase concerns those periods when the passionate nationalistic wave subsides and 'normality' returns, leaving a steady, almost unnoticed, low-level everyday reinforcement of nationalism.

Geopolitics is an area where 'event-based' nationalism can be observed, activating the previously dormant 'banal nationalism' into a 'hotter' form. According to this version, the nation is not a 'daily plebiscite' but a far more irregular event; 'The timing of these punctuated plebiscites is largely determined by the perceived opening and closing of opportunities to contest an existing order' (Bessinger 2002: 25). As Mark Bessinger pointed out, Nationalism is about a 'struggle for control over the imagination about community'. In this struggle, the event 'constitutes a critical moment at which the loyalties underlying competing claims to nationhood are put to open test' (Bessinger 2002: 18). In this chapter we examine two external events that have occupied a prime place in Russian political life in 2013-2014, the Maidan 'revolution' in Kiev, the other the 'absorption' of Crimea.

## **The empirical findings**

In the first section I unpack the dominant 'geopolitical vision' of the majority in Russia today. This includes an examination of how Soviet imagery frames what it means to be a 'normal great power'. This refers to pride in the *derzhava*, one that demands the respect of world powers but is also increasingly self-reliant and able to play the role of 'counterweight' to US dominance in world affairs. I will also examine how this is reinforced by a powerful emotional myth about how Russia and the West have 'got on' in the past and present, narratives that are heavy with frustration/envy (*ressentiment*) and status-driven demands for equality. A key finding of this chapter is how feelings and understandings of the relative decline of Russia vis-à-vis the West

since 1991 are not abstract issues; they seem to have seeped into personal lives in highly emotional ways. Thus, in part one we find at the core of popular geopolitics an emotional Russian great power nationalism that, at the moment at least, seems to lack any ideological foundations beyond restoring 'normality' and fighting the next battle in a struggle with the West.

The second section turns to what one would expect to be an important part of Russia's foreign affairs; understandings of her role in the post-Soviet space. Here we have an interesting negative finding: the appeal of both Eurasianism and protecting/uniting a Russian ethno-cultural space (*russskii mir*) is limited among respondents.<sup>100</sup> The ideologies behind these projects are not well-understood or internalised across respondents. Yet, even though many respondents were not aware of these ideological justifications for Russia's primacy in this space, many still approved of the country's leading role in the region without elaboration, suggesting this is still a hegemonic position for many. On the other hand, a coherent set of ideas opposing supranational projects like the Eurasian Union and *russskii mir* was observed. This appears to be grounded in a certain populist 'put Russia first' mind-set that demands priority for citizens living inside the Russian Federation's borders. This point of view may have strong potential to offer challenge the statist rhetoric of hegemonic nationalist discourse.

Thirdly, I consider the role of external events in rallying and convincing ordinary people of the need for unity. This ties in with the previous chapters in several ways. These events activate an inherent conservatism within popular historical memory that fears collapse and rapid social and political change. This triggers for the painful memories of relatively recent lived experience such as the collapse of the USSR and the 'wild nineties'. Furthermore, I will argue that external events assist the political leadership in temporarily overcoming deeper fractures within the political nation and convincing the wavering middle that the nation's course is sound. In both cases, popular geopolitics are more than interactions with the discourses of state media; the

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<sup>100</sup> The term *russskii mir* ('Russian World') has two main directions. One is more moderate and is about supporting the "Russian-speaking world" and 'compatriots abroad' and building *russskii mir* cultural centres across the globe. The other is connected to a more radical nationalist discourse of the 'divided Russian people' and has found supporters such as Zhirinovskiy and Zyuganov, who have tried to have 'Russia is a divided nation' passed as a concept in the State Duma.



emotions released in these events are vital to the way the nation is ‘lived’. While Maidan produced powerful feelings of fear and relief, the addition of Crimea brought jubilation, both on the peninsula and in Russia itself. Overall, Crimea and Maidan also function as graphic and visceral evidence of the need to struggle against the West’s pernicious designs and follow the experienced and strong leadership provided by President Putin. Thus, in this chapter we examine how geopolitics are central to the current, rather stable equilibrium achieved in the Russian political system. This is one where radical socio-economic inequality, corruption and falling or stagnating living standards at home are balanced out and compensated for through an appeal to a geopolitical vision in which Russia strives toward her ‘normal’ and ‘desirable future’ despite the constant struggle with evil external forces.

## **Part one: The essence of the geopolitical vision ‘from below’**

### *Soviet frames of normality*

In recollections about the USSR’s role in the world, a common tendency, for both young and old alike, was to demonstrate pride in a strong, powerful, large state that played a vital role in the world. This was about ‘*pride in the derzhava*’, the feeling that ‘*we lived in the biggest country, where we had so many prospects, you could be whatever you wanted, there were astronauts, industry, the best education and healthcare, there was pride for the country.*’ (Galina (40) Sociology department, NN). A large part of this thinking in older respondents is that ‘*until perestroika we were considered to be a strong state. We were kind of unique (ocobennymi) (...) our economy performed well. We were the first to get to space. I mean we had achievements in which we were strong. I think that we had a far better position than we do now*’ (Natalya (50) Accountant, NN). This focus on ‘remembering’ the strengths of the USSR was common in the older respondents, suggesting positive images on Soviet strength still predominate and are not seriously confronted, contradicted or counteracted by any counter-narrative about a ‘*colossus with clay feet*’ or ‘*a superpower with rotting vegetable warehouses and salami shortages*’ (Arseny (41) Business development, NN).

What is being reproduced here is a nostalgia for Soviet greatness and a pride in the *Derzhava* that avoids any discussion about sustainability and ignores

critical narratives on the existence of a Soviet empire. Instead, we find the USSR presented in idealistic terms: *'we did not attack anyone, but we always helped who ever asked for help. And, by and large, I still believe we will never attack anyone (...) or dictate terms to any country.'* (Ludmilla (50) Head of University Dormitory, NN). This presents the USSR as a force for 'good' in the world, a fundamentally peaceful country that sent out aid to 'brother nations'. Thus, the USSR was a 'normal' great power that also behaved 'normally'. There is the strong sense many respondents feel the Russian Federation has inherited these 'normal' attributes today. Nostalgia for Soviet greatpowerness involves a certain whitewashing of the USSR's record in foreign policy. For example, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was generally viewed as a genuine attempt to help a 'brother country' rather than any indication of a malicious creeping Soviet 'imperialism'.

This nostalgia also included the idea that a state must be powerful and respected by other powers: *'the feeling that we were a strong country and that were taken into account (s nami schitayutsya), we were respected, we had that'* (Zhanna (43) Journal editor, Moscow). Even today, quantitative polling suggests most Russians believe their country is most respected for her military might and nuclear arsenal.<sup>101</sup> In other words, even if *'nobody understood our country'* it was clear *'everyone was afraid of us'* (Natalya (50) Accountant, NN). The emotional component of this revolves around respect: *'Being a great power means being respected, they kind of feared us, viewed us as equal and did not treat us with any contempt. Because Russians are like bears, and when the mouse hits a bear in the nose, the bear gets mad!'* (Elisa (58) Director of Sports Centre, SPB). The sense that the USSR was too powerful to be treated disrespectfully re-emerges as an important theme later when we consider emotional narratives about Russia's relationship with the West. Overall, however, defining greatpowerness in Soviet terms is popular. It appears many feel Russia looks more and more to have regained her great power status.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>101</sup> In response to the question 'what is Russia respected for by other states?', 38% chose 'military might and nuclear weapons', 18% natural resources, 10% territorial extent. The proportion selecting military might has steadily risen from 13% (1997), 23% (2006) up to its current level. <https://www.levada.ru/2016/11/14/rossiyu-uvazhayut-za-rakety/>

<sup>102</sup> An outright majority (64% as of 2016) believe Russia is now a great power, up from 21% in 1999 <https://www.levada.ru/2016/12/12/derzhavnost-i-osobyj-put-rossii/>. Meanwhile, polling reveals a roughly three way split on the question of whether Russia has now achieved parity with the other 'great powers' of the world. The most recent polls show 41% agreed she had achieved this, 37% did not and 23% could not say. Looking at the dynamic over the last twenty years, the proportion disagreeing

On the other hand, this nostalgia is challenged by an important group of younger respondents who offered a very different definition for being a great power that had little to do with Soviet frames. Instead of defining a great power as a formidable, respected military superpower, these respondents took a different model to be worthy of aspiration. This was the model of modern, economically successful and culturally attractive countries with political systems that protect the rights of their citizens. This definition rejects the idea that ‘*a nuclear weapons stockpile and threatening the whole world*’ equals great power status. Instead, a great power is one in which ‘*citizens feel good, where there are possibilities for self-realization, for prosperity*’ (Dmitri (28) Actor, SPB). Rather than military might, greatpowerness is based on ‘*having technology, brains, writers, scientists, those who give something back to society. Those who don’t consume but generate values. A great power is one that has strong legal institutions, where everything works, where it is safe to walk the streets at night.*’ (Marina (29) Manager in Software Company, SPB).

This split in normative standards between younger and older respondents was also on display in the previous chapter in appraisal of Putin’s domestic policies, Russian political passivity and paternalism, as well as media consumption. It may be that this growing rejection of Soviet-inspired frames of normality among younger people will be increasingly important in sociological and political terms. Indeed, one feature of recent anti-corruption protests across Russia is the prevalence of younger protestors.<sup>103</sup> Although more research would be required to confirm this, it does appear significant proportions of Russians under thirty tend to reject the normality of the Soviet past and ignore the abnormality of the nineties as their key frame of reference.

On the other hand, in the representative sample of this research, there was more evidence that Soviet-style qualities are still dominant for many respondents explaining what a normal great power does on the world stage. This can be found in two key values about Russia as a great power. Firstly, Russia should be self-reliant and self-sufficient. Secondly, Russia should act as a balance or counterweight in global politics. These two points found convergence along a

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has been stable, while those agreeing Russia had achieved parity rose from 17% in 1998 to a high of 48% in 2008. This was done at the expense of the ‘cannot say’ group, which fell from 41% to 23% in the same period. <https://www.levada.ru/2017/01/30/rossiya-i-mir-2/>  
<sup>103</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/ivan-davydov/russia-s-latest-protests-are-no-child-s-play>

wide range of respondents and are, not incidentally, things the late Soviet state enjoyed. From this point of view they are features of state ‘normality’ that should be restored and suggest that Russia’s role as a ‘second-class’ actor in world affairs is well understood by ordinary people. Central to this idea is viewing the 1990’s as an ‘abnormal’ period of collapse and declining state power, ending with Russia excluded from the core of developed nations and assigned the role of resource colony locked into a subservient relationship with the West.

The first key point in restoring Soviet ‘normality’ was the popular view that Russia should be a ‘*self-sufficient power*’ (*samostoyatel'noy derzhavoy*), rather than the ‘*resource power*’ (*syr'yevoy derzhavoy*) of the 90’s whose leaders ‘*were paid by the Europeans and Americans*’ and have large sums saved abroad as reward for their ‘*treachery to the country*’ (Lev (46) Programmer Developer Oracle, SPB). Part of being self-reliant in the current period is the ability to say ‘no’ to the West, in contrast to the way pro-Western leaders like Gorbachev said ‘yes’: ‘*His “yes” was the worst word for us, and led to all that mess. I like it when a leader says “No, we won’t do it this way, it doesn’t suit us (...) we can live without the benefits(...) without apples, without meat, we can get by ourselves somehow*’ (Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB). Reference to ‘living without apples and meat’ is a nod to post-2014 Western sanctions and the need for Russia to be able to ‘*stand on its own two feet*’ by ‘*becoming economically independent*’ (Daria (28) Events Manager for Local Government, SPB). This interprets Russia’s imposed economic isolation and sanctions as a positive stimulus to Russian economic development ‘*because, without this isolation business in the internal market simply cannot work, it just isn’t competitive*’ (Sergei (40) Marketing Department, SPB).

A common sentiment was that, after the sanctions are lifted, Russian companies would be in a better state to compete on the world market.<sup>104</sup> Thus, despite the immediate hardship and disruption entailed by sanctions, a new parity in economic affairs would be achieved:

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<sup>104</sup> This sentiment is also revealed in large-scale polling in 2017, with 62% saying Russia should get used to life under Western sanctions versus 26% saying Russia must try to lift the sanctions. <https://www.levada.ru/2017/01/30/rossiya-i-mir-2/>

*I think for development you need to do something by yourself, maybe again an Iron Curtain should be raised, we can soak in our own juices for some time, and only after that go out into the world market (...) it is normal to be a self-sufficient state (samodostatochnym gosudarstvom). I mean so fine there are sanctions, no meat, no fish, but we can get by without it, lets talk now and establish some kind of parity.*

**Ilia (46) Import-Export Business owner, NN**

A key supporting pillar of this sentiment for a ‘self-sufficient state’ was that Russia has ‘*enough of her own resources*’ and, therefore, ‘*we can provide for ourselves, develop our own sectors and we don’t need anyone, no partners.*’ (Tanya (29), Nursery nurse, NN). Calls for Russia to be industrialised again were popular in older respondents, based on the common-sense position that ‘*all revenues from the energy resources need to directed to the country’s interior (...) to develop infrastructure, roads, energy sources, industry (...) we can build all this ourselves*’. (Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB). Thus, we find a wide range of respondents support the idea that Russia must be financially, industrially and economically self-reliant vis-à-vis the West. This means ending Russia’s subordinate status and essentially redrafting the way world politics functions.

This brings us to the second main thrust in elaborating on Russia’s role in the world was that she should act as a ‘counterweight’ or ‘balance’ to American dominance of global affairs. There was common consensus among respondents that American global supremacy, arising from the collapse of the USSR, is a negative thing. America is ‘*overdoing it*’ and ‘*kind of losing their minds due to absolute power*’; the harmful effects of post-1991 US interventions from Kosovo to Iraq are cited to prove this (Dmitri (28) Actor, SPB). Playing the role of the ‘*counterweight to the USA*’ is, thus, a response to the aggressive destructive wars America has unleashed on various countries. One respondent, referring to Russia’s first 2013 intervention in Syria exclaimed: ‘*I could not truly believe that our crumbling state (nashe razvalivsheyeya gosudarstvo) could hold America back (sderzhivat)*’. Yet, given the way the USA ‘*has unleashed wars across the world*’, it is clear ‘*a counterweight is needed.*’ (Timur (26) Postgraduate researcher, Moscow). Thus, in some ways, what we have here is a reboot of the Soviet geopolitical identity that took pride in the USSR checking America’s

imperial ambitions in the Third World. Another respondent developed this further, claiming Russia is the only country capable or willing to be a ‘counterweight’ (*protivoves*) to American hegemony. While today’s Russia ‘cannot do the same things as America’, it remains the case that ‘Russia is the last country to stand in the way of the Americans achieving world domination. Not North Korea, not the Middle East, only our country.’ (Mikhail (29) Actor, Moscow).

In restraining the American push for global hegemony, many respondents underlined the defensive and anti-imperial nature of the Russian counterweight: ‘we don’t stick our noses in anywhere, we only defend ourselves, (...) but the Americans intervene everywhere and kill loads of people.’ This line of thinking views the recent clash over Ukraine as a decisive moment in US-Russian relations, as ‘when they started coming up to our borders, we were forced to react, after all that mess in the Ukraine (...) but we were just defending our borders and nothing else’ (Elena (29) Accountant, Dzershinsk, NN). The conviction that Russia is a defensive power facing up to American greed and imperialism is a well-worn sentiment that links well to Soviet traditions (and propaganda) in interpreting world affairs.

On the other hand, Russia’s ‘counterweight’ alliance of the Eurasian Union states and/or the BRIC countries could be presented as distinct from the Soviet style: ‘we do not want to return to a bipolar world (...) and the numerous nuclear warheads, factories and closed cities’. Instead the hope is in aligning with ‘the rising centres of strength in China, India and Brazil and even Iran’, a new, fairer, world order will be built. (Vladislav (28) Postdoctoral researcher Middle Eastern Studies, NN). In contrast to the Soviet period, the BRIC countries are not united around an internationalist socialist ideology but merely co-operate on a pragmatic basis to reduce American hegemony and gain a voice in deciding global problems. In such a way, national interests are still taken into account, many centres of power co-operate and negotiate and the principles of democracy and the market are not contested by any alternative vision of modernity. The sense that the dominant geopolitical position in Russia today is

essentially defensive is also backed up by quantitative polling.<sup>105</sup>

Thus, a distinct geopolitical vision emerges of Russia *‘going according to her own path’* by *‘creating the Eurasian Union, linking with the BRIC countries and connecting closer to China’* thus *‘creating a counterweight’* and *‘infuriating America’*. The ultimate result of these efforts will be that *‘Russia’s voice in the world’* will be heard more clearly (Vlad (26) Marketing, NN, Sergei (29) Business Development, NN). Russia’s new assertiveness in Syria and Ukraine were offered as evidence that this vision is being realised. It would appear that high-profile foreign policy actions, such as the Russian intervention in Syria, reactivate certain schemata of what makes a ‘normal’ great power. Yet, perhaps one important strand of this, which runs deeper than Soviet legacies, is the idea that Russia can offer something distinct to the world. A significant number of respondents suggested Russia’s counterweight bloc could eventually emerge to win a deep long-term strategic partnership with Europe: *‘the EU and Eurasian Union could act as a counterweight to the New World (USA). What excites me most is that Russia and Europe could be closer on these terms’* (Sergei (40) Marketing Department, SPB). This, in essence, means *‘Europe won’t be worse off if Russia becomes a strong state. Then Europe will have an alternative (...) to the USA, the superpower that controls everything’* (Alexander (25) Business development manager, SPB).

This brings us to the third key aspect of Russia as a counterweight – this imagines Russia as a force that acts as a balancer between East and West. This idea was presented in diverse ways, such as in a more general terms, that world politics are *‘like a biological system, from which you cannot just discard one element. It is like if you remove one element then total chaos will ensue’* (Marina (25) Language teacher, NN). More specifically, respondents viewed Russia’s global role in terms of *‘establishing a balance of power between European and Asian countries, smoothening out the rough edges on both sides, bringing harmony to the world’* (Anastasia (21) Economics Student, NN). The above is closely bounded to a question with rich intellectual and cultural roots, is Russia closer to Europe or Asia, is she civilizationaly unique? A strong majority of respondents

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<sup>105</sup> Answers to the question ‘what are Russia’s priorities in the world today?’ were: 59% the peaceful and safe existence of the country, 49% to restore Russia’s prestige/authority on the world stage, 41% protect domestic producers.  
<https://www.levada.ru/2017/08/17/priority-vo-vneshnej-politike/>

supported the idea of Russia's unique path, justifying this along the lines that Russia is a large and diverse country and that *'geographically we have connected East and West. Culturally, it has worked out that we are not quite Europeans and not quite Asians (...) therefore the recipes that suit some countries don't always work here (...) One way or another we need our own thing (nado chto-to svoye)* (Mikhail (29) Actor, Moscow). Most did not elaborate on deeper value clashes between a 'degenerate West' and a 'traditional Russia' as a bastion of conservative values; instead there was more of the idea that Russia could be a *'happy medium' (zolotaya seredina)* between Asian and European values/cultures (Anastasia (21) Economics Student, NN). A common theme was to present 'Western' values as more centred on materialism and individualism, while 'Eastern' values referred to more a spiritual collectivism, a cosmic acceptance of one's fate. Respondents argued that both value systems could exist side by side in Russia and, given her position between these two value systems, Russia can act as *'a connecting platform between East and West'* (Lubov (43) Private tutor, SPB).

Thus, even in advocating the idea that Russia had a unique role in the world, most respondents did not internalize a coherent sense of Russia's distinct civilizational purpose or offer any ideological basis for this difference. This is also the picture in quantitative polling, where large numbers (40%) are unable to articulate what Russia's special path is and those who do tend to link it to economic development (29%).<sup>106</sup> Practical and simple arguments were often encountered in this research. One of the most common of these was that Russia must tread *'a third path'* as she is *'too large to enter the EU (...) and Russia still needs to go through a long period of development to reach this stage'* (Roman (28) Journalist Kommersant, Moscow). As an *'enormous country'*, Russia *'must have her own mind and go her own way, and not copy the experience of other countries'*. She needs *'a Tsar'* at the head and *'effective local rulers'* in the regions to hold together *'a complex multi-ethnic country with so many regional specifics'* (Marina(29) Manager in Software Company, SPB). It can be argued that the above is not about Soviet frames of normality as we lack any reference to the kind of 'civilizational mission' that Soviet propaganda provided. It is also unclear if

<sup>106</sup> <https://www.levada.ru/2016/12/12/derzhavnost-i-osobyj-put-rossii/>



this is a return to pre-1917 discourses about Russian exceptionalism and her 'unique path', all of which makes it impossible to follow the example of the West. What can be said with some certainty, however, is that discussions on Russia's distinctiveness are less important to geopolitical identity than certain popular emotionally charged myths about how Russia's relationship with the West has developed in modern times.

### *Emotional narratives on the struggle with the West*

Interestingly, emotional narratives on the relationship with the 'West' chime well with the previous section on Soviet frames as the message is similar: Russia must regain past strength and stand on her own two feet. What is different is the shift in focus, as in these emotional narratives an external protagonist (the West) is moved to centre stage. The way the politics of emotion operate here very much tie in with theories on collective self-esteem, whereby group self-worth emerges from discussions on the internal purposes and goals of the group and status comparisons with out-groups. According to these emotional narratives, the main goal for the Russians is to end subservience and restore normality, while the main status comparison is with the 'West', which is seen to be the main force standing in Russia's way.<sup>107</sup> This emotional narrative is of vital importance to how the nation is 'lived' by ordinary people; by internalising the emotions emerging from the nation's triumphs and travails, one may 'experience' the nation in a very powerful manner.

The first part of this emotional narrative is that the 1990's were a disaster in geopolitical terms, a point made by Putin in an oft-quoted speech.<sup>108</sup> One key emotional component of this 'disaster' was the common idea that, after the collapse of the USSR, Russia was ready to join the West but, despite her earnest willingness, she was turned away. The respondent below jokingly compares the Russians to the Stark family from the television series *Game of*

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<sup>107</sup> Here it is important to point out that respondents tended to use 'the West' (*zapad*) as synonymous for a geopolitical alliance led by the USA. 'Europe' (*Evropa*) was treated as a distinct concept, a space to which Russia was felt to belong to varying degrees.

<sup>108</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>

*Thrones*,<sup>109</sup> a royal house that are constantly cheated, attacked and humiliated in wicked and devious ways by their enemies:

*The West missed a really big chance to behave themselves here like people, back when they were loved here. But given that they behaved like pigs, my attitude to them got much worse. I constantly saw treachery. Remember 'Game of Thrones'? The Russians are the Starks. All of our life has been a struggle with some tough force, all of our lives we have been faced with betrayal, deception and destruction through various means.*

Yuri (45) Sales Manager, Moscow

The sense that Russia as a country has been victim to all kind of lying and cheating is reproduced in a number of interlinked ways. It could be reflected in the '*broken promises*' over NATO's Eastern expansion after 1991 (Viktor (22) International Relations Student, NN) or in frustration at how economic reform saw Western-backed policies and money being used to encourage Russia's deindustrialization and her transformation into a '*resource colony*' (Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB). The key emotion in this narrative is that Russia was not treated fairly, the West was devious in her treatment of a hopeful if naive Russia. The apparent '*invitation*' for Russia to join '*the community of Western nations*' was not done on the basis of enjoying equal rights; instead it was like a restaurant where '*Russia was brought in not as a dinner companion but as a course to be eaten*' (Grigori (49) Computer programmer, NN).

Thus, in the Russian 'collective self-esteem' we find a powerful emotional consensus exists on what happened to the nation after 1991. Morozov (2013) has described Russia's relationship with the West as 'paradoxical' as, on the one hand, Russia was 'dependent on the West in both economic and normative terms' seeking further integration into the Western-led global system but, on the other, she remained an independent great power and sought acknowledgement of her own regional power base (Morozov 2013: 25). What is interesting is how respondents portrayed this 'dependency' in terms of humiliation and approved the end of this phase of unequal relations. It is here that we find the strength of *ressentiment* in popular geopolitics; feelings of

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<sup>109</sup> *Game of Thrones* is a popular medieval fantasy epic that, among other things, depicts the intrigues of two powerful families struggling to sit atop the 'Iron Throne' and, thus, win control of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros.

frustration and anger over the failure of the post-1991 transition is outsourced to an external scapegoat. This transference allows one to avoid experiencing this failure in terms of one's own failures or inadequacies.

The second important component to this emotional narrative was the idea that the West maintains a consistent desire to weaken Russia, something seen as part of a 'Great power struggle' that has bubbled on through the centuries. In this example, the *longue durée* version of history propagated by an important segment of respondents in chapter four is embedded in popular geopolitics. Respondents of all ages and social backgrounds reproduced this image of a plotting and scheming West. It is worth noting that some did use non-emotive terms to describe this contest. This used realist interpretations of international relations that view the West and Russia as locked in a zero-sum contest for relative gains, such as winning access to '*markets and resources*' and gaining '*economic growth*' (Artem (49) computer programmer, NN; Stanislav (22) Electrical Engineer, NN). In other words, Russia and the West have incompatible aims on the world stage, and neither can be too pleased about the successes of the other: '*Russia only becomes friends with the West when she is weak. When we hear Russia is an enemy to the world, that can only mean we have become strong. (...) That is normal. When Russia is strong she acts in her own interests.*' (Evgeny (30) sales manager construction materials, SPB).

On the other hand, the sense that the West is the main obstacle in Russia's path could be expressed very emotionally, revealing how this emotional narrative is deeply internalised and personalised. In this way the collective self-esteem is powerfully felt on the individual level:

*They have always tried to screw Russia (...) they always want to take things from us. But I like it when we answer them in kind (...) like when we took Crimea back on the sly, I was glad. Any misfortune for the West that is accompanied by our success always makes me feel proud. This is my country. I was born here and I must love her even if there are things I don't like about the leadership.*

Pavel (27) export-import business, SPB

Thus anti-Western emotional sentiment works in a compensatory fashion and helps reduce feelings of inferiority, inadequacy or failure. This emotional narrative of Western hostility claimed that the West has never really shown any genuine goodwill to Russia. While Russia has *'been drawn to the West over the centuries'*, the West has viewed Russia with *'contempt.'* Here Russia is imagined as a person who is *'frozen out'*, forced to *'sit it out'*, shunned as a *'lesser people'* (*vtorosortnie rebyata*) (Sergei (29) Business Development, NN). Thus, the West emerges as a constituent 'Other' in popular geopolitics; many respondents expressed the conviction that Russia could never expect to be treated well by the West. This is because the West wants to *'limit Russia's potential and reduce her allies'* (Svetlana (25) Postgraduate researcher sociology, NN) OR *'demonstrate to the world that Russia is a weak country'* (Boris (22) Computer Programmer, NN).

Respondents commonly claimed the goal of the West is to *'subordinate'*, *'weaken'* and *'control'* Russia as part of a geopolitical game centred on access to resources (Marina(29) Manager in Software Company, SPB). Here the West is ready to treat Russia much like the Middle East; a region with resources that must be broken up and controlled:

*Now the whole of the Middle East is going up in flames, Yemen and Syria and all that. They managed to do that there and they also want to do it here to stop us escaping them. All these wars have a common aim, to get a certain part of the world to enter the world market for energy resources. I think that is why they want to smash/fragment (razdrobit') Russia and divide up the energy resources.*

Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB

Given the salience of such views and the strong feelings they provoke, Russia's goal in world affairs is obvious: resist the perfidious West, break free of dependency and subservience and gain equality. A large part of this emotional language presents Russia as a 'player' in world affairs that is in a 'contest' with the West and other powers. In this imagining of Russia she is seen as previously crippled and side-lined but now in full recovery, 'standing up', regaining her balance and footing. Rather than being part of 'the West' with

second-class status, she is on her own again, *‘on an equal basis with some other countries that are able to live their own way (po-svoyemu) (...) and not under the dictates of others’* (Andrei (51) Computer Programmer, SPB).

Thus, Russia’s new and independent manoeuvring on the world stage is a return to ‘normality’: *‘I don’t want Russia to be like some errand boy, some servant sent to do this and that. I think there should be enough strength to take good, normal, sensible decisions without submitting to anyone’* (Vera (43) IT Project Manager, NN). Respondents repeatedly made the point that Russia’s goal in all this was *‘to be respected and listened to (...) as a fully-fledged equal participant (polnopravnyy uchastnik) in world affairs* (Marta (54) retired and unemployed, SPB), in other words, *‘to occupy a place equal to the other countries (...) to be an equal among equals.’* (Yegor (44) Newspaper editor, NN). The above offers compelling evidence of the important role played by feelings of frustration and anger that are displaced outward onto an external scapegoat (*ressentiment*). A common tendency in these portrayals is the way emotional language is consistently internalised and reproduced by diverse respondents. This suggests that emotional narratives are a powerful locomotive force driving Russia’s geopolitical identity, partly because they invoke othering language against an external force (the West) and also, as we will see in the final section, fit in with on-going events in world affairs.

## **Part two: Russia’s backyard: The Post-Soviet Space**

### *Territorial conservatism*

The above section demonstrates how a mixture of Soviet frames of a ‘normal great power’ and emotionally-driven myths about Russia’s relationship with the West form a vital part of how people conceive of Russia’s role in global politics. A large part, however, of the worsening relationship between Russia and the West is connected to the sense that Russia demands a ‘leading role’ in the post-Soviet space, something that Western initiatives in Ukraine and Georgia appear to challenge. There is clearly a sense that Russia has a special role in a region that shares a common history of deep interactions in economic, cultural, social and political terms. With increasing frequency since Putin’s watershed Munich speech in 2007, the Kremlin has made it clear it regards this

space in special terms; in her actions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014), Russia announced a ‘hands off’ warning to any power considering involvement in the post-Soviet space. It appears, however, that Russia’s role in the ‘Near Abroad’ is either poorly understood and/or not something respondents can articulate easily.

This data set, however, suggests there is very limited support for any ‘revisionist’ or ‘irredentist’ project but, on the contrary, wide scale acceptance of the 1991 borders. This ties in well with quantitative polling that consistently shows the majority does not desire changes in borders or even agree Russia should expend effort to influence the post-Soviet space.<sup>110</sup> Respondents in this study were also lukewarm in their views of the Eurasian Union project and took divided and murky stances towards any ethno-cultural ‘Russian World’ ideas or measures to support the ‘Russians of the Near Abroad’. Furthermore, while some respondents show tacit acceptance of Russia’s role, many also contest and oppose the expenditure of national resources away from citizens residing in the country.

As was discussed in chapter five, the majority of respondents manifested a kind of territorial conservatism linked to fears of state disintegration triggered by separatism or internal upheaval. Rather than harbouring ambitions of expansion by rearranging the 1991 borders, the common trend was common acceptance of the RSFSR borders as a sound basis for the post-1991 *status quo*. Although the entry of Crimea into the Russian Federation heralded the first significant changes to this territorial *status quo* and was supported by a large part of the population, this should not be interpreted as a mass shift toward support for a ‘revisionist’ foreign policy akin to the post-Versailles Germany. While attitudes to the consequences of the 1991 collapse among respondents are divided, most of the negativity around it was not focused on any ‘unfair’ territorial allocation.

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<sup>110</sup> According to Denis Volkov, Levada Centre polling data from March 2015 showed a solid majority (57%) was still not in favour of changing borders. A similar proportion does not favour Russia making a special effort to keep the former Soviet states in its orbit of influence with 64% saying Russia should not hold the former republics under its control.

<http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=61007>

Instead, in remembering 1991, the principles of national self-determination often trumped any statist or imperial sentiment on keeping the USSR together. Older respondents spoke of a *'relaxed attitude to the succession of republics'* as *'you have to divide things up fairly and let them go in peace'* (Lev (46) Programmer Developer Oracle, SPB). The logic of separation was mentioned by a variety of respondents. In common-sense representations, the collapse was *'part of the natural course of events'* as trying to hold the USSR together is like *'keeping a husband with a wife he does not love or want to live with (...) well, there is no point trying to chain him to the radiator'* (Marta (54) retired, SPB). The principle of national self-determination was understood on the human level: *'It was no shock to me. Every person can determine their own future and I thought then "let them sort things out by themselves"'* (Pavel, (58) IT specialist, NN).

The idea of history *'following its natural course'* also emerged, that the USSR's demise was normal as *'clearly at that moment it had to happen that way. In every state, a strong leader appeared that said, "It is time to go our separate ways. We have our own sources of income. We will form our own state"'* (Sergei (40) Marketing Department, SPB). The sense of an unnaturally large state that came to an expected or natural end is reflected as part of the trajectory that all large states go through:

*I think that any empire lives according to a sine wave graph; it reaches a certain peak and then inevitably falls downward. This is a kind of law of nature. I mean 1991 was like the fall of an empire that could no longer go on in that form. Well, this is not just about empires, I mean any kind of powerful entity.*

Nadezhda (30) nanny, SPB

While respondents listed a number of negative consequences emerging from the 1991 collapse, an unfair territorial deal was not one of them. We are still far from any mass irredentist view that the might present the Russian Federation as the leftover stump of something more authentic that was lost due to a 'disaster'. On the contrary, many respondents supported that the principles of national determination were respected in 1991 and, therefore, the peaceful divorce of the Union was not a cause for regret. Despite the fact that fieldwork

was conducted in 2014, a year that saw the first changes to the Russian Federation's borders since 1991, the redrawing of boundaries did not appear to be a hot topic. Instead, there was a clear preference among respondents for maintaining the current *status quo*. Thus, a very large proportion of respondents accepted the current borders of the Russian Federation as legitimate and an authentic reflection of the 'real' Russia.

### *The lukewarm response to Eurasianism*

Thus, while revisionism and irredentism do not appear to be key drivers in respondents' geopolitical thinking, it is also difficult to establish a clear interest in two key projects that offer ideological sustenance and practical ideas for Russia's role in the post-Soviet space: Eurasian Integration and *russskii mir*. The first, Eurasian integration, concerns the creation of a voluntary union involving the co-operation of the different independent states in Eurasia; Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. It is a geopolitical project to bring these countries closer in ways similar to the European Union as it involves economic integration, the opening of borders, unifying the legal and administrative space and creating a single labour market. Among respondents, Eurasian integration was mainly viewed as a 'logical', 'obvious' state-led project of little concern to them or their everyday lives. Positive positions among most respondents typically reflected lukewarm approval and laconic acceptance without any serious engagement in any of the ideas behind Eurasianism.

The key reasons for accepting the project as 'natural' were that it involves reintegrating countries that are close anyway, uniting old allies into a defensive cordon against Western geopolitical intrigues, as well as offering pragmatic economic benefits for Russia as the largest and most advanced economy. Only a smaller number of older respondents engaged more with the more ideological part of Eurasian integration and enthused over the prospect of reintegrating 'our people' into another 'large union'. The sense that the people of the post-Soviet space are still one was common among older respondents in particular: *'we are all very strongly interconnected and entwined, I have friends there and*



*here of mixed nationality (...) we are used to moving around freely (...) we don't feel borders* (Lubov (43) Private tutor, SPB).

However the above sentiment was not regularly encountered in younger respondents. Instead, it was more common to find a focus on three key pragmatic benefits. Firstly, the point was often made that such a project was obvious as *'neighbouring states such as Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine are pretty much on the same level'* Russia *'can be a leader among them'* (Nadia, (26) Lecturer in Asian Studies, NN). Thus, it is seen as natural for Russia to lead these states, as *'the majority of Russians still see the succeeded republics as part of Russian space, you can still travel there with no visa (...) these countries are not seen as foreign (...) for me these countries are very close'* (Olga (26) Costume designer, SPB). The idea that *'we are better together than going it alone'* was often suggested, the sense being that the larger an economic, military and political entity is, the better off it will be: *'I am totally in favour of this, it is like the creation of a new CIS (...) while the rest of the world falls into separate pieces, new independent states like Scotland and Catalonia, we, in contrast to the rest, should unite other states together'* (Alexander (25) Business development manager, SPB). The above views Eurasian integration as an 'obvious' and 'natural' development. It can be viewed as 'hegemonic' in the classic Gramscian sense; positions that are so obvious as to not require much elaboration or discussion.

The second key line of pragmatic reasoning was the Eurasian Union is part of building anti-Western alliance bloc, a point that we have already encountered in this chapter. For example, one pair of brothers saw it primarily in terms of *'creating a counterweight (...) another bipolar opposition'* (Sergei (29) Business Development, NN), or in other words, it is a *'political game, a kind of standoff, everyone knows about NATO and this is an attempt to create an equilibrium of strength, to hold back certain forces in the West'* (Dmitri (28) Actor, SPB). This view of Eurasian integration clearly ties it to a wider attempt to resist Western hegemony along with the BRIC countries. The third pragmatic point of support was economic: Russia would gain with integration with her Eurasian neighbours. These gains were described in a manner not a far cry from empire: the attraction of profits, cheap labour and the penetration of Russian capital were offered as the key benefits of Eurasian integration. This was often

accompanied by descriptions of the chaotic and backward condition of the periphery countries; one that resonates with post-imperial perceptions of ex-colonial spaces. The key benefit of the Eurasian Union is that large economic blocs follow *'the logic of development'* by creating a *'developed internal market of around 350 million people'* that will allow *'stable and successful prospects for self-development'* (Viktor (22) International Relations Student, NN). Thus, the Eurasian project is often viewed as a 'plus' in pragmatic terms without deeper sense about why the different countries of Eurasia should draw closer together.

Interestingly, these 'hegemonic' positions must be balanced with the large amount of scepticism displayed by respondents from both age groups. On the one hand, there is the concern that Eurasian integration is the repetition of an old mistake: *'there is a phrase, "do not enter the same river twice" – I mean if there is a possibility of unifying it should be on a different level, not like before in the USSR'* (Olga (55) Factory worker Avtozavodsk, NN). Opposition to this project was also offered on the grounds that it was another example of *'gigantomania'*, a mania or obsession with grand-scale projects: *'why do we need it if we already can cross any borders, travel to any place, trade and work where we want'* (Julia (25) Human rights activist, Moscow). In comparison to the EU, some saw the Eurasian Union in different terms. Rather than a regionalist project emerging from soft power mechanism, Russia suffers from a negative image in the post-Soviet space in the light of the Ukraine crisis:

*The Eurasian Union is like a large common territory upon which one shabby/mean man (Russia MB) has arrived and told the rest: "Now this is called this, everyone lives like this and I will tell you all what to do now". But these are different states with their own national identities. (...) Russia won't succeed as she has now ruined all her prospects of a voluntary union.*  
Julia (25) Human rights activist, Moscow.

Others expressed a lack of interest in this project due to the limited potential, in economic terms, of closer economic integration with 'poor' states such as Kyrgyzstan. Eurasian integration could be branded as a *'union of poor bodies'* (*souz bednyakov*) that has little utility or genuine purpose beyond *'naked propaganda'* (Arseny (41) Business development, NN). Another part of the scepticism was

to doubt how Russia would be able to integrate such vast lands into a coherent, functioning union. The vastness and diversity was highlighted as ‘*difficult to manage*’, a challenge of fantastic proportions as ‘*it is really hard to control such an enormous system, such an enormous space that is so multi-ethnic. Maybe even impossible (...) utopian*’ (Marina (25) Language teacher, NN). While some respondents were sceptical about Eurasian integration, attitudes towards another project for Russia on the Eurasian space, *russkii mir*, were even more poorly articulated.

### ***The lack of coherence on russkii mir projects and division on the ‘Russians of the Near Abroad’***

While the above suggests ideas around Eurasian integration do not bring a strong positive consensus among respondents, *russkii mir*, we find, despite the spike in its use across state media, is less commonly understood.<sup>111</sup> Respondents very rarely actually mentioned the term ‘*russkii mir*’ or the principles of protecting an ethno-cultural unity in explaining the Russian role in the post-Soviet space. Most, when asked what the term meant for them, could not reply with any clear answer. Only a small number of respondents used the term in mapping of the post-Soviet space. Below, this is done when discussing Russia’s ‘natural’ borders, claiming that a large chunk of Ukraine is part of the *russkii mir*:

*As far as the other borders go it is hard to say... (pause) a large part of Ukraine should be part of Russia, although formally this will be impossible, but this is a part of the russkii mir and here some decision must be taken. On the other hand, it is clear the Baltic States aren’t ours and never have been.*

Artem (49) computer programmer, NN

While some positive engagement with *russkii mir* was observable, a similar number of respondents actually rejected it as a concept, either due to its ‘nationalist’ connotations or its obscurity: ‘*the term provokes feelings linked to*

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<sup>111</sup> The term *russkii mir* (‘Russian World’) became increasingly visible in media output and state proclamations in 2014 alongside other terms with an ethno-cultural slant such as *russkaya vesna* (Russian spring) and *Novorossiia*, which denotes an ethnic Russian region in the Russian empire that is now located in Ukraine. Polling data, however, suggests a large part of Russian society (71%) have not even heard of *russkii mir*. [http://www.sociologos.ru/novosti/CHto\\_takoe\\_russkij\\_mir\\_Dannye\\_oprosa\\_VCIOM](http://www.sociologos.ru/novosti/CHto_takoe_russkij_mir_Dannye_oprosa_VCIOM)

*nationalism. It isn't about culture or modern life, but nationalism, although, I don't know, that is just how it makes me feel'* (Mikhail (29) Actor, Moscow). The overall majority of respondents, however, could not offer any elaboration on what *russkii mir* means to them and did not link it to how they understood foreign policy initiatives. As we will see in the next section, *russkii mir* themes are not prevalent in the way people responded to events in Crimea.

The term *russkii mir* clearly means a number of different things to different people. This ranges from a space where people speak Russian, to territory where ethnic Russians predominate, or places Russia has a special affinity with, or even some mystical or metaphysical form of Russia reflecting her thought, culture and literature. For many respondents in this research, the term appears to mean nothing at all. At the moment the diversity of definitions on offer reduce the significance of *russkii mir* in popular geopolitics. Ambivalence on the Russian World topic is reflected in attitudes to the Russians living in the Near Abroad, a group that, by varying assessments, includes up to twenty-five million people in the fourteen former republics. Here we find respondents split over Russia's responsibility for these people.

The first group expressed a strong sense that these were 'our people' (*nashi lyudi*). Central to this were emotional narratives on the 'plight of Russians in the near abroad.' For older respondents this was founded on knowledge of the tragic experiences of family, friends or acquaintances who had ended up in these republics due to Soviet development patterns that '*assigned there from the big cities to develop things*' Through no fault of their own, they were forced to flee when local leaders '*started to turn the screw*' (Ludmilla (50) Head of University Dormitory, NN). Stories of hurried evacuation under the pressure of anti-Russian violence buttress the strong sense that the Russians of the Near Abroad were victimized: '*I had a friend who left Chechnya in 1990 (...) he sold his house and left quickly, he says they really oppressed the Russians, they threw things at them when we were on the bus leaving, saying things like, "we should kill all the Russians, we have never liked them"*' (Denis (41) Journalist, NN). The principle of 'unfairness' was often referred to in how things unfolded after the collapse: while '*some were lucky and had apartments in Nizhny, others had them in Kazakhstan and lost them. (...) it is really hard when you live in one*

*family and all that is yours starts falling apart and everyone runs away'* (Vera (43) IT Project Manager, NN). This emotive narrative is replete with the powerful imagery of tragic exodus. Recalling his own family's stories of leaving Kazakhstan, a younger respondent underlines the nastier elements of the period, where his uncle was only able to leave the house under the escort of 'friendly Kazakhs'. The clear theme is the oppressive anti-Russian atmosphere: *'you would wake up and see graffiti written on the building opposite your window: "Russians don't leave! We need slaves and prostitutes." And so it is no surprise they all left en masse'* (Dmitri (28) Actor, SPB).

A sense of feeling together with the people of the Near Abroad, which was observed in attitudes to Eurasian integration above, is found here as well. Among these respondents there was a clear preference for treating the 'Russians of the Near Abroad' (*rusские v blizhnem zarubezh'ye*) as 'our people' that should be looked after. Much of this sentiment made little reference to Russian ethnicity but more implied there was a mass of people in the former republics that still felt themselves to be Russian. One common sentiment was to encourage the 'return' to Russia of *'those 20-25 million from the former republics'*, who *'live in poverty'* and are *'oppressed'*. The sentiment here is for Russia to open her arms to their 'people in the Near Abroad': *'We need a special state programme to support them, especially as we have lots of land, we can give them start-up funds, a million roubles or so. There are so many abandoned villages, we could have them there'* (Oleg (49) Construction site foreman, SPB). These feelings are shared by a significant number of respondents, mainly among older people that still carry the torch of 'Soviet internationalism' and imagine that a large part of the populations living in post-Soviet countries are still 'our people'.

In contrast, a large group of respondents took the opposite stance, and rejected the idea that the 'Russians of the Near Abroad' are 'our people'. Two key themes emerge in this. Firstly, these respondents relied on a civic conception of Russianness that claims in order to belong to and be worthy of access to the country's resources one must be a citizen and hold a Russian passport. These views were common in the younger generation and may represent a transition in mentality among generation born after the end of the USSR: *'If they have*

*lived there for so many years and have another passport from that country, then I don't think they need anything from Russia, we don't have responsibility for them'* (Eva (26) Unemployed, university graduate, NN). Moreover, a common idea was these people have *'had the chance to get a Russian passport and they probably can still do this. (...) if they haven't take advantage of this chance and decided to remain there'* then Russia does not *'have any responsibility'* (Boris (22) Computer Programmer, NN). This trend reinforces the findings of chapter five, where we found more a civic-based identity membership of the nation to be dominant, one that views citizenship (*grazhdanstvo*) as more important than national group (*national'nost'*): *'If they live there, that means they have good reason to, they have family and work, for example. I think Russia shouldn't support them. This is a question of citizenship. They should be supported by the country of which they are a citizen'* (Ksenia (22) Law student, NN).

The second strongly observable tendency, which crossed both younger and older respondents, was the appeal of a certain 'put Russia first' sentiment in this question. Here the main focus was on the large sums of money being spent on 'foreign citizens', which could instead be used to improve the less than impressive living standards in Russia itself. One respondent claimed *'we maintain ourselves more poorly here than those abroad'* and referred to the fact that Russia still pays pensions to non-citizens in the CIS countries: *'we pay them pensions (...) Here the pension age is rising but we still pay them abroad. Some Ukrainian, for example, leaves their country, cunningly keeping their apartments there, and then returning here, where we put them on a pension. What a nightmare!'* (Elisa (58) Director of Sports Centre, SPB). Older respondents often showed less empathy with the 'plight' of the Russians in the Near Abroad due to the feeling they were seeking some kind of 'hand-outs':

*If things aren't working out for you, don't cry about it, just do something. Don't hope for a kind uncle to do everything for you (...) at the end of the day you aren't an invalid. They should come here and take advantage of the opportunities. But they don't want to, those 'non-citizens'<sup>112</sup> in the Baltics...*

Anton (52) ex-officer, small business owner, SPB

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<sup>112</sup> A reference to the non-citizen 'resident alien' status of many ethnic Russians in the Baltic States.

In some ways this populist ‘our country first’ approach is one that opposes grand supranational initiatives and demands priority for ‘our citizens here’. Resistance to helping the Near Abroad is strongly founded on the sense that the Russian Federation has ‘enough of its own problems’ in terms of healthcare, infrastructure, housing, employment and education. Therefore, even if ‘*in human terms*’ one may ‘*sympathize with those people*’ and ‘*want things to be good for them*’ the problem remains that: ‘*We are in such a state ourselves. We don’t have enough for the budget (...) if we give more to them we will probably be without money ourselves (...) I pay taxes and want these funds to be spent on our children, on the old folk here*’ (Natalya (50) Accountant, NN).

This ‘put our people’ first sentiment is clearly a form of dissent toward government policies that fail to stimulate economic growth or better living standards. It is also a partial rejection of interventionist policies in Ukraine. Interestingly, resentment toward state policies for ‘foreign citizens’ could extend to the ‘Ukrainian refugees’ entering the country in 2014. While state media tends to portray Russian citizens as welcoming these unfortunate ‘refugees’ with open arms, the sentiment among families with limited income may be very different:

*There is all this ‘humanitarian aid’ with those enormous trucks and, very often, people my parents’ age (...) and those relying on state benefits (...) get really mad because we don’t help our own citizens but we do offer it to those from Ukraine. (...) They show it on the news, they give medical treatment to some little boy in Ukraine, fly him over in a plane (...) that just causes anger here because we have so many sick children waiting years for treatment.*

Katya (22) Student Politics, NN

Above we have explored how Russia’s role in the post-soviet space remains rather ill-defined. Overall, justifications for Russia’s new ‘imperial’ role in the Eurasian space do not appear to be well-developed, there is a great deal of fuzziness and lack of familiarity with foreign policy concepts in the post-Soviet space. On the one hand, an important proportion of respondents are clearly sceptical and resist the idea that Russia should exert resources to ‘dominate’ or

‘control’ this vast space. Overall, it would appear the Eurasian integration and *russskii mir* concepts, which attempt to give substance to Russia’s ‘role’ in the post-Soviet space, have not gained wide traction. On the other hand, to a large number of respondents Russia’s leading role in the region remains so obvious and natural it does not require much elaboration. The lack of articulation over Russia’s role in the post-Soviet space is in stark contrast to how Russia’s role vis-à-vis the West is expressed. It can be argued that this is because the latter role is integrated far more into emotional narratives in ways with which large numbers of diverse social groups can identify.

### **Part three: The power of events**

In this final section we examine how two external events, the Maidan protests and the collapse of the Ukrainian government (Winter 2013-14) and the absorption of Crimea (March 2014), activated certain visions of Russia and the outside world. Interestingly, this activation is clearly more connected to the points made in part one of this chapter (the normal great power and the emotional narrative about the West) than those of part two (ideological constructions such as Eurasianism or *russskii mir*). Instead of any ‘ism’ or elaborated ideology, what is far more important is a widely shared set of emotions and normative standards, which act as important instruments in unifying (at least temporarily) the fractured national body. In other words, the emotional narrative of struggling for ‘normal’ status is far more appealing than the abstract ideas of Eurasian integration or reintegrating the *russskii mir*. The two events considered in this section provoked contrasting emotions: whereas Maidan caused fear, anxiety and disgust, Crimea brought elation, confidence and a feeling of vindication. Yet, despite the contrasting emotions, both events work toward the same direction: geopolitics ‘from below’ connects with efforts ‘from above’ to consolidate support for the existing system.

#### ***Maidan***

The Maidan event is important on two levels. On the one hand, it is an excellent example of how events can bolster social conservatism and encourage a ‘rallying round the leader’ effect. It also demonstrates how myths in the historical memory can be activated in a real present context, including



references to a historical *longue durée* and also to recent lived experience (1985-1999) and memories of state disintegration, economic hardship, rising nationalism and potential civil conflict. In chapter six, I examined a roughly three-way division among respondents in their attitudes to the state of Russian ‘democracy’ and the Bolotnaya protests of 2011-12. While, the first group was critical of the state of Russian democracy and showed much solidarity with the protests, the second group held far more ‘statist’ positions, rejecting criticism of Russian democracy and showing hostility to oppositional forces as ‘fake’ or ‘dangerous’ to Russia’s interests. The third and largest group sat between these two poles, employing a rather pragmatic stance to politics and preferring the *status quo*. What was interesting was how responses to Maidan seem to bring the third group closer to the second group and, in many cases, encourage partial loyalty in the first group. Thus, all three groups are brought together in a conservative stance that views upheaval and revolution as the worst possible outcome, and is antipathetic to any social or political activity that risks internal stability. The recent disastrous example of Ukraine is deployed as the main exhibit in this argument. This can be viewed as a kind of ‘negative conservatism’ that seeks to retain the *status quo* at any cost. It appears to suffer from certain emptiness as it lacks positive values; in contrast to the new horizons offered by conservative figures in the 1980s such as Thatcher or Reagan, this is no call for positive change. Instead the ‘call to arms’ is to hold firm, see the crisis through and lose as little as possible.

Yet, the power of Maidan goes further than this. I encountered several respondents who reversed their moderately anti-Putin stances post-Maidan. Thus, it appears Maidan also encouraged people from group one to shift their stances to a more pro-Putin position. This may reflect success in how the event was managed ‘from above’; pro-Kremlin media interpretations of Maidan presented it in terms of a binary choice between ‘order’ and ‘chaos’. Below we can find an illustrative example of how two brothers experienced a rapid shift in their political positions in response to Maidan. Beginning with mildly oppositional views, they describe some of the dramatic feelings provoked by the Bolotnaya protests of 2011-2012. According to their version, the era of ‘quiet politics’ (2000-2011) ended dramatically with the ‘*rokirovka*’ performed

by the standing president and prime minister. This created a ‘*wave of anger*’ due to the sense that ‘*an usurpation of power*’ had occurred. However, when the Ukraine crisis erupted these brothers switched to a pro-Putin position: their anger toward the ‘regime’ and sympathy for protests largely evaporated, and was replaced with a desire to support the President in this vital struggle:

*It seemed that it was something new, (...) the situation changed rapidly. Our worldview, actually I think the worldview of many Russians (rossiyan) changed towards Putin, especially when the situation in Ukraine started, we sensed the enemy was at our gates, we felt this and understood that, after all, we are not living in a world of fairy tales. In fact, it is a world with teeth.*

Vlad (26) Marketing, NN

Thus, Maidan revealed the existence of a hostile and threatening external world. The ensuing chaos and bloodshed in Ukraine led many to retrospectively approve of how Putin handled the Bolotnaya protests as this ‘*clever and rational policy*’ ensured Russia did not end up like Ukraine. The story of Ukraine after the removal of Yanukovich shows how rapid political change can bring appalling consequences: ‘*the pressure of the crowd on the authorities does not lead to anything good. They lost Crimea, they have pretty much lost Novorossiia, they have led the country into a difficult economic situation. One problem after another. However bad Yanukovich was, I think they lived better with him*’ (Viktor (22) International Relations Student, NN).

The images produced by Maidan provoke fear and repulsion towards the violence unfolding on Russia’s doorstep: ‘*They showed this on TV, I saw it on the internet (...) I saw clearly that this represented a danger (...) this would destroy everything, it could initiate processes leading to a real civil war. (...) when everything there blew up, it really was frightening*’ (Andrei (51) Computer Programmer, SPB). The idea that a violent rabble of protesters can bring a state to its knees is precisely the message state media propagates, underlining the ‘lesson’ of Maidan: gradual and careful evolution is always better than sudden violent upheaval. This lesson is spelt out in a respondent with otherwise pro-Western orientations who, given the urgency of the Maidan situation, states his

conditional support for the current president. In his view the event of Maidan means the prospect of democracy is put on hold as Russia is now in emergency mode, and Putin is the best man to guide the country through these difficult waters: *'It is better if changes occur when society itself takes form and becomes smarter... not when people try to raise hell with street protests. If a Maidan started here, Russia would have it ten times worse than what Ukraine has now. It is better to stick with Putin'* (Mikhail (24), IT support, SPB).

Thus, Maidan is, in terms of future possibilities for the country, perhaps the worst-case scenario for the average Russian. In some ways, it was an event that replayed some of the memories of recent lived experience (1985-1999). For many respondents Maidan is a word that encapsulates an entire narrative of disaster that is very familiar to people with lived experience or transmitted memory of the nineties. Maidan is understood to have caused economic disaster, territorial losses, brought new uncouth people into the political leadership, weakened the country on world stage and led to chaos and disorder in social affairs, such as the mass disruption of wages, pensions and a spike in inflation. The parallels in these narratives with what happened in Russia post-1991 are unlikely to be coincidental; one reason for the successful propagation of this version of Maidan is its congruence with pre-existing memories of the wild nineties in the population as a whole.

Furthermore, for a significant segment of respondents (especially those male over forty), the events of Maiden are connected to the historical *longue durée* of Russia's struggle with a hostile West. In this case Maidan as an event taps into the anti-Western sentiment described in part one of this chapter, providing indisputable evidence of the West's dastardly and subversive efforts to reduce Russia to submission and reduce her influence in world affairs. As the respondent below indicates, Maidan was a 'dress rehearsal' of something planned for Russia:

*It is only thanks to Putin at the moment this attempt has failed. I think it will happen again and very soon. It's just that a lot of politicians have come up with ideas how to destroy Russia, how to break her into pieces. (...) The aim is always the same, to bring about a collapse, that is what is happening in*

*Ukraine now (...) I don't know why the West needs it, (...) what makes them try to destroy us, to eliminate us?*

Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB

Thus, Maidan serves to powerfully consolidate support for the current leadership and confirm the sense that Russia is locked in a geopolitical war of nerves with a powerful adversary that is ready to use underhand tactics to gain the upper hand. Images of the Maidan event are a call for order at home; the narrative of a Ukraine's woeful post-Maidan experience shores up a negative kind of conservatism, one that is hostile to social and political change but does not offer much in the way of a positive future development path. This stands in contrast to the absorption of Crimea, an event that, as we will see below, produced more euphoric feelings.

### *Crimea*

As with Maidan, respondents did not tend to view the Crimea event within any ideological framework for Russia's role in the post-Soviet space, be it along Eurasianist or *russkii mir* lines. Instead, it is far more linked the way Russia's rivalry with the West is imagined. Three main lines can be distinguished in explaining support for Russia's actions in Crimea: (i) strategic and pragmatic geopolitical concerns; (ii) support for national self-determination as a justification for Crimea detachment from 'alien' Ukrainian rule; (iii) emotional euphoria and pride. In the first two points, what is noticeable is that a large number of respondents accept, internalise and reproduce much of the reasons offered to them by the political leadership of the country via state media.

Turning to the first point, respondents often couched their concerns in terms of the strategic and geopolitical importance of the peninsula vis-à-vis Russia's rivalry with the West. This paints the event as '*a correct geopolitical step*' to forestall the '*possible stationing of foreign military bases there*'. This rational, realist position views Ukraine as '*just a pawn in a geopolitical game*'. In other words: '*before the country was under the jurisdiction of Russia, a year and half ago she decided to be under a new one. (...) but what is going on there now is barbaric, and nobody cares. The murders going on there in the Donbass*

*are just bargaining chips (...) in a long-term game of geopolitical chess* (Lev (46) Programmer Developer Oracle, SPB).

Those focusing on geopolitics and strategy claimed Crimea was not part of any wider expansionist policy: *‘There should not be a policy of “let’s absorb all the land that we had in the past”. Crimea was about the military aspect. Sevastopol is a naval base (...) it became really important, it was going to end up with either us or NATO’* (Grigori (49) Computer programmer, NN). In addition, Ukraine’s sudden shift in orientation made action necessary: *‘when Ukraine took this clear pro-American position, which was clearly aggressive in intent, we realized we would never make an agreement with them. As a result, Putin took this step and just took Crimea for us. And he did it all very beautifully, pulled it off well’* (Vlad (26) Marketing, NN). In its most elaborated form, Russian actions in Crimea fit into a long-term strategy of action in geopolitics: when a neighbouring state takes a pro-Western stance, Russia intervenes to create a new zone of instability that acts to bar their potential entry into the EU or NATO:

*I understand more about geopolitics now. Why do we need the Donbass? Just to make sure Ukraine doesn’t go anywhere. Donbass is a breeding ground of instability, and as far as I know they don’t take countries with these problems into the EU or NATO. Therefore, Moldavia has Transdniester, Ukraine has the Donbass, Georgia has Ossetia and Abkhazia. There is not much hope for them, they must know that. This is what big-time politics means. I agree we are not behaving well, but we are just like the rest in this regard. Yeltsin tried to bend over backwards for everyone, but what was the point?*

Anton (52) ex-officer, small business owner, SPB

The respondents above tie in well with the findings of Mikhail Suslov (2014: 598), who, in examining Russian Internet sites, uncovered, ‘a geopolitical master-narrative helps users distance themselves from morality and the law of nations when speaking about the annexation of Crimea’. Strategy and geopolitics successfully combat liberal and humanist accusations of Russian misconduct, justifying the intervention in Crimea. In seeing geopolitics as a

‘game to be played’, the attributes of a winner include flexibility, steely pragmatism and ruthless decisiveness. Despite the Machiavellian elements of this ‘geopolitical game’ played for relative gains, respondents are also able to share the excitement of being on the winning side when the West is outmanoeuvred or left ‘carrying the can’. This also relates to the sense of the collective self-esteem, as outwitting the West over Crimea emerges as a source of pride.

The second main line in defending Russia’s actions in Crimea refers to the theme of national self-determination. Here the basic argument is that, given the backdrop of Maidan and looming catastrophe, the vast majority of Crimeans viewed desperately wanted to ‘return’ to Russia and this, on its own, is sufficient justification for Crimea’s entry into the Russian Federation: *‘90% of Crimeans do not want to return to Ukraine. Firstly, they speak Russian and they are Russian. Many have Ukrainian passports. (...) Now they have Russian citizenship, which is correct. There is a slogan ‘We are coming back to Russia’ («vernemsiya snova k Rossii»). I agree with this wording’* (Nadezhda (30) nanny, SPB). In many cases respondents reproduced this state discourse on ‘the return of Crimea’. The President described the ‘return of Crimea’ as a ‘reunification,’ reversing the foolish actions of Khrushchev, who signed it away to the Ukrainians. In his 2014 Presidential address, Putin (2014a) referred to Crimea as ‘native *Russkaya* soil’ and Sevastopol as a ‘native *russskii* town’.

This use of *russskii* instead of *rossiyanin* or *rossiyskii* when justifying the addition of Crimea throughout 2014 has led some to view this as a shift towards repainting Russia as the nation-state of ethnic Russians (Teper 2016; Blakkisrud 2016). However, as was discussed in the literature review of this thesis, the term *russskii* is often used by Putin to recall Russia’s imperial past, conjuring images of the unity of the Eastern Slavic peoples.<sup>113</sup> In using the adjective *russskii* with Crimea, respondents offered a range of ideas, such as *‘Crimea has always been russskii land’* (Oleg (49) Construction site foreman, SPB), *‘the russskie went there and built everything’* (Elena (29) Accountant, Dzershinsk, NN) OR *‘Crimea is historically a place where a lot of russskii blood has been spilt’*

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<sup>113</sup> For more details see [http://www.ponarseurasia.org/ru/memo/201601\\_Laruelle](http://www.ponarseurasia.org/ru/memo/201601_Laruelle)

(Vladislav (28) Postdoctoral researcher Middle Eastern Studies, NN). In these examples, *russkii* is used to refer to the imperial past and the historical unity of the peoples living in this empire. But it is important to underline that this use of *russkii* is not clearly expanded on by respondents in ideological terms, such as the need to protect an ethno-cultural spatial entity such as *russkii mir*. Instead we find a reference to a more vague and undefined imperial space.

Respondents were more divided on whether Crimea represented some new rule in international affairs or just a ‘one-off’ extraordinary event. Very few respondents were prepared to adopt self-determination as a new guiding principle for the future. Some were alarmed by this prospect as a ‘*negative precedent*’ of territorial redistribution: ‘*this is dangerous and, well, the same thing could happen with us in Tatarstan or Chechnya*’ (Alexei (25) Assistant to deputy of Local Assembly, SPB). Others talked of the ‘shock factor’: they could not believe that Russia could do something that ‘*from the point of view of international practices, law and interaction (...) complete does not fit in with the behaviour models of normal countries (...) leading to a confrontation with the whole civilized world*’. (Igor (26) English language teacher, SPB). It would appear many allay such concerns by viewing the Crimea absorption as a special case and not a new long-term trajectory or for full-scale revision of the 1991 borders: ‘*Crimea is something special, I am not saying it should be like this everywhere. It was just a manifestation of popular feeling (...) but we can’t do this everywhere, as this could led to (pause), well it needs to be done gradually*’ (Leonid (45) Religious history lecturer, NN).

This idea of Crimea as a ‘manifestation of popular feeling’ brings us to the third main line: the emotional response to the ‘return of Crimea’ as a unifying event. This is something that is deeper and more profound than geopolitical strategizing or subscribing to the principles of national self-determination. The ‘Crimean event’ released a surge of positive emotions and is an excellent example of how ordinary people interact with an event, which nationalises public discourse and enters everyday life. Here people are not merely reproducing state discourse, but experiencing and participating in Crimea as an event. In personal and family contexts, we can trace how the nation is ‘lived’, i.e. how people understood this as a great moment in the life of the Russian

nation. Crimea is a part of many Russians' childhood, a place with real meaning in terms of personal memories. This event seems able to unite different generations of Russians around the feeling of pride and delight, and we can observe how, when small groups of Russians come together in front of the TV screen to experience a crucial event, people experience the joys of national triumph:

*My reaction was very positive (...) because this is my childhood. Yes, hooray, hooray (shouts) I visited it as a child, all of this is mine. Sevastopol is a Hero-City, the town of Russian sailors and then, boom!, it's no longer ours. It was really hurtful when it stopped being ours. I thought "what the hell?!" In childhood I thought, how is it possible? (...) Then Crimea returned to us and hooray, hooray, how great! (...) my children were so happy about this, they shouted 'Hooray', they couldn't get enough of the TV reports, they thought Russia had shown everyone, super! My parents were also glad as this was also about their history, their life.*

Vera (43) IT Project Manager, NN

Thus, for many respondents the Crimea event is not so much about 'strategic geopolitical thinking' or national self-determination or even fighting the West. Instead, it *'was probably the proudest moment I have had as a Russian (...) when I saw people after the incorporation of Crimea into Russia, they were truly happy (...) I was glad for their happiness, it was like a human moment'* (Nadezhda (30) nanny, SPB). Much of this sentiment seems to have much in common with how countries respond to national sporting triumphs. The difference here is that this victory is not limited to sports enthusiasts; as a chapter in the story of a nation taking positive action in an international crisis it is something all members of the national community can enjoy.

However, one of the downsides, at least from the point of view of the Kremlin, to this 'event-based' dynamic is these emotional effects can begin to wear off with time. Current quantitative polling shows only a gradual depreciation in support for the Crimean action.<sup>114</sup> However, it seems fair to say that, in the cold light of day, after some time passes, this event will no longer have the

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<sup>114</sup> Those viewing the absorption of Crimea as bringing mainly benefits fell from 70% in March 2015 to 62% in 2017, while the number claiming it brought harm rose from 18% to 23%. <https://www.levada.ru/2017/04/18/15811/>



same effects. In the case of the Crimean event, the early euphoria did not last in many respondents. Below, even for someone who had *'never been to Crimea'* and did not *'care about it as a place'*, the joy of being a victor, when *'something that used to be yours is returned'*, was strongly felt: *'I think for the first month almost everyone was glad, if you asked anyone "what do you think about Crimea" they would all reply "Cool! I am so happy that I am Russian (russkii), I really love Putin." But then, when you start to think things through, when the prices rise...'* (Katya (22) Student Politics, NN).

One interesting finding from the discussions on Crimea was the how, for some, the addition of Crimea, from the point of view of the 'nation', is not all good. This brings us back to use of 'us' and 'them' language and hints at the existence of a 'put Russia first' populist discourse. As with discussions on Chechnya in chapter five or the Russians in the Near Abroad above, the central idea is interventions in Ukraine means more of 'our' tax money is spent on 'other' regions rather than on 'us'. The term 'feed' (*kormit*'), used in chapter five to describe the funding of the North Caucasus, was also employed with regards Crimea. In this context, Crimea is added to a list of 'things we have to pay for', including Tajik migrants and Chechnya:

*I thought, now they have added Crimea, the authorities will start to try and appease the Crimeans (zadabrivat' krymchan). But who will pay for this? The Russian citizens. (...) we will have to maintain them (nam ikh kormit'). We maintain Tajiks, Uzbeks, Gastarbeiter. We maintain Chechnya even though we won the war there, and now we will maintain Crimea, all at our expense. I don't want it.*

Denis (41) Journalist, NN

Thus, attitudes to Crimea can harden with time, especially in the context of continuing difficulty in the Russian economy. One respondent discussed Crimea in the context of a recent decision to reduce the minimum wage (*promezhutochnii minimum*). Meanwhile impressive amounts continue to be spent on Crimea, despite the sense that, after the euphoric emotions of victory dissipate, Russia has gained very little:

*They (the authorities MB) think we live so well and the economy is doing so wonderfully that they can lower this (minimum wage MB). Naturally, they are lowering this so they can spend more on Crimea (...) but we get nothing out of it. We help them (the Ukrainians MB) but they just hate us more and more. (...) taxes are on the rise, everyone is starting to realize that things are not so rosy after all. It turns out we have to sweat for Crimea. And it is like, many start to wonder, what the hell do we need it for?*

**Katya (22) Student Politics, NN**

It would appear this is a well-developed counter-narrative and, as emotional euphoria over Crimea drifts into the background, new scepticism may move into the foreground. This is a shift that will not be visible in state speeches or Russian media, but may, all the same, occur in the kitchens and living rooms of the many ‘from below’. Perhaps an important element of this dynamic is the apparent failure of any ideological construct to spread across the population that could help people conceptualise the need for sacrifice, suffering and hardship. For the vast majority of respondents neither the Crimean nor the Maidan ‘event’ belong to any wider framework for explaining Russia’s role in the post-Soviet space, be it Eurasianism, preserving the *russkii mir* or some irredentist revisionist geopolitical vision.

If anything the Kremlin’s intervention appear to have been disastrous to the prospects of Ukraine joining Eurasian integration and have resulted in unprecedented hatred and violence within the *russkii mir* between Russians and Ukrainians, who many understand to be ‘brother peoples’ (*bratskie narodi*). Thus, the Crimean and Maidan events are not connected to a wider ideology but service a kind of emotional great power nationalism, which, as we saw in part one, is largely connected to Soviet frames of normality, emotional narratives about Russia’s struggle with the West and, as we have seen in this section, the power of events that allow people to ‘cheer on’ the nation and participate in the struggles of the *derzhava*. The problem for Russia’s political leadership is the risky challenge of finding the next set of events that will continue to feed and invigorate this great power nationalism.

## Conclusion

Thus, in this chapter we have explored the vitality of geopolitics ‘from below’ as a way of ‘living’ the nation. In many ways, this popular geopolitics resembles a kind of great power nationalism that is strongly informed by Soviet traditions, propped up with emotional narratives and shorn of any elaborate ideological foundations. Part of this is a return to pre-revolutionary Slavophile traditions in viewing Russia as fundamentally different from both East and West, ending a period of uncertainty over Russia’s role in the world that has arguably gone on since the start of perestroika all the way up to the Ukraine crisis. Again it should be underlined that very few respondents elaborated on any ideologically driven discourse on ‘Russia as a unique civilization’; instead more practical grounds were found. Three key lines interlink in Russian geopolitical identity and explaining Russia’s unique path: (i) the need to hold the world’s largest state together, avoid state disintegration and the view only a strong leader can achieve this; (ii) the sense of being locked in a battle for equality with the Western powers where failure is not an option (iii) the sense that Russia, due to her huge size, will be a special kind of ‘great power’ that cannot ‘join’ the West. As we have seen in this chapter, Russian exceptionalism is understood to natural and unavoidable; she has no choice but to be this kind of power as this is what Russia has always been. This is a vital constituent element of the current hegemonic nationalist discourse and is absolutely central to the way the state authorities are able to legitimise themselves as the right people to lead the nation.

As well as these deeper traditions, we find that certain normative standards, derived from the late Soviet period, still have a strong influence. The image of a mighty *derzhava*, one that holds its own in the world, both in political, military and economic terms, retains its appeal among the many. It remains to be seen whether alternative concepts of a ‘normal power’, such as those taking the ‘successful countries of the twenty-first century’ as their benchmark, will become more dominant, especially during generational change. At the moment, it appears that withstanding Western sanctions and successfully intervening in Syria are taken as evidence of Russia’s restore normality to her global role, one that is commensurate with her resources, military power and Great power

traditions. It is important, however, that we examine the replaying of Soviet frames of normality alongside the existence of powerful anti-Western sentiments in popular geopolitics. There is a strong line of *ressentiment* to memories of humiliation and betrayal over the way the West treated Russia after 1991. Powerful emotional imagery of the West treating Russia as ‘second-class’ or ‘servants’ abound. Approval for the current course revolves around the quest for equality and respect, the right for Russia to be recognised as an equal great power.

The above reveals how people engage with geopolitics in ways that do not always correspond to state-driven rhetoric. In this case, most do not adopt any of the ‘isms’ promoted by the state, be it Eurasianism or *russskii mir* concepts. No clear consensus for a revisionist or irredentist foreign policy can be found. Instead, the territorial boundaries of the 1991 settlement are generally accepted by young and old. When we consider how Russia’s role in the Near Abroad is conceptualised, there is little evidence that ideological concepts are very popularly understood. Part of the reason for this may well be that Russia’s leading role in Eurasia is so obvious and natural to not need elaboration.

On the other hand, a clear ‘Put Russia First’ sentiment was observable that emphasises the country’s internal development in terms of looking after ‘our own citizens’. This may have potential as an anti-hegemonic nationalist discourse, especially given the current context of increasing economic difficulty and stagnating or worsening living standards. While the short-term appeal of Putin’s geopolitical vision lies in rebooting Soviet-inspired power images and playing out a new chapter in the narrative of struggle with West, the failure to connect an ‘ism’ to Russian geopolitics may leave Putin exposed over time.

Thus, Putin’s success is built on a great power nationalism that reactivates images of Soviet-style ‘greatpowerness’ and deploys emotional narratives of conflict, frustration and betrayal. It can be argued that external events such as Maidan and Crimea, serve as substitutes for ideology in as far as they offer real-time on-going illustrations that the struggle with the West is real and external forces are truly dangerous. Maidan and Crimea are examples of

moments when ordinary people ‘experience’ and ‘live through’ the nation, mainly through the feeling certain common emotions, responding to the messages of the state and interacting with fellow citizens to create a commonly credible popular geopolitics. The power of the event-based dynamic, regardless of whether it produced negative or positive emotions, is in consolidating people and reaffirming loyalties. What is less clear, particularly in the case of Crimea, is what will occur after these events start to fade from the forefront of people’s minds. It may be that old questions will resurface, such as ‘how will we pay for Crimea?’ ‘When will living standards improve in our town/region?’ ‘Do our leaders really care about improving our lives?’ These questions shift the national focus away from the current interest in ‘What should Russia’s role in the world be?’, ‘What relationship should she have with Europe?’, ‘How to retain great power status?’ and ‘What should be done to regulate international ‘hot-spots?’ It remains to be seen if those opposing the incumbent in the upcoming Presidential elections of 2018 employ this kind of shift in focus in their campaigning.

## Conclusions

This thesis has focused on revealing the current equilibrium in Russian national identity and mainstream nationalism, as well as highlighting the key ways it is contested. It has done this through employing a qualitative approach, thus hoping to remedy a dearth in the field of Russian studies, which remains dominated by quantitative large-scale surveys. The ethnographic fieldwork used in this research has unearthed certain ‘thick descriptions’ of how the nation is imagined, revealing the micro-level picture. Using a grounded theory helped give ordinary Russians agency in determining the questions of importance to them. The thesis has highlighted some of the key components of Russia’s hegemonic nationalist discourse, as well as how they are internalised, reproduced and challenged or contested. In treating nationalism as a set of discursive formations that make essential claims about the nature of the social world, this thesis has unpacked some of the ways nation-ness appeals to ordinary people of very diverse backgrounds. This contributes to the field of nationalism studies by accounting for national identity and nationalism in the specific context of post-Soviet Russia, revealing how emotional narratives (myths) and visions of what is natural and expected (normality) play a vital role in how people talk about themselves as a ‘nation’. The thesis also makes a contribution to post-socialist literature by underlining some of the important ways Soviet legacies still play out in Russian national identity.

This thesis has viewed ‘the nation’ as a largely discursive entity that is internalised, reproduced and transmitted across social boundaries and generational lines. In tracing this process of reproduction and transmission it is extremely challenging, if not impossible, to capture the multiplicity and diversity involved in a population of over 180 million people. Nonetheless, this thesis has argued that, for a nation to survive, it must reproduce itself in the minds of the many. To achieve this, it must be put into a legible form that is congruent with the hopes, aspirations, fears and anxieties of ordinary people. Part of the appeal of the nation is the wide range of claims it makes in answering a central question: ‘who are we as a people?’ These claims cover an enormous amount of ground, and involve sub-questions such as ‘where did we come from and where we are going?’, to ‘what kind of people are we?’, ‘what

kind of leadership should we follow?’ and ‘what relationship should we have with other peoples?’ Searching through the responses of around one hundred respondents, what has been uncovered is a coherent and interlinked set of answers, which can be termed a hegemonic nationalist discourse. It is ‘hegemonic’ in that it is agreed upon by many ‘from below’ and reinforced ‘from above’ resulting in consensus. It is ‘nationalist’ in as far as it is made up of a set of claims about the nation. Finally, it is a ‘discourse’ because it is made up of talk and words; a series of narratives, myths and normative standards.

In this thesis, I have argued there are extremely close links between the Russian national identity and the mainstream ‘nationalism’ of the country. I have taken national identity to be a way of talking about oneself as part of a ‘nation’, which is grounded in memories, previous habits and continuing everyday life. Mainstream ‘nationalism’ is the set of claims that, when taken together, tap into the reservoir of national identity to construct a coherent nationalist discourse that resonates with as many citizens as possible. Actors ‘from below’ and ‘from above’ interact in this dynamic, ensuring the dominant or hegemonic nationalist discourse is always evolving. At the same time, anti-hegemonic discourses exist outside of the ‘mainstream’ that, with time and changing conditions, can emerge as a threat to the existing set of claims about the nation. In the Russian context, with limited space for public political debate or protest, state management of the media and electioneering, it is easy to assume a hegemonic discourse on the nation is somehow easier to secure across the population. However, as this thesis has shown, quantitative polling showing eighty to ninety percent support for President Putin does not reflect the serious discursive fractures within the nation.

Historically speaking, this thesis has attempted to situate the current equilibrium in Russian national identity in the context of longer historical and cultural trends. As outlined in the literature review, the Stalinist period provided the foundation of the modern Russian nation and resembled the modernist notion of the nation in as far as it was based on universal literacy, mass urbanisation, new forms of communication and a powerful discourse on the ‘Soviet Motherland’. Stalinist nation-building arguably leaves its marks on Russia today in the traditions of anti-Western feeling, the pride felt in being a

self-sufficient and mighty world power, as well as identification with a strong leader and rejection of political opposition and factionalism. At the same time, what made Stalinist nation-building highly unorthodox was the virtual absence of any free spaces where the nation could be articulated outside of official propaganda sources. When Stalinist controls were eased, two elements of Russian national identity soon resurfaced. Firstly, the Westerniser-Slavophile debate appeared in the thick journals, returning to the old questions of ‘what is Russia?’, ‘Where does she belong?’ and ‘How is she unique?’. These re-emerged under Developed Socialism and continue to be of importance today. Secondly, the split between the ‘intelligentsia’ and the masses of Russia, who lived in different worlds and were not encouraged by the state to communicate or interact, was again apparent.

The emergence of the Soviet person under Stalin was continued through into Developed Socialism. *Homo Sovieticus* was increasingly expected to leave politics to the Party and get on with personal life. The strong paternalistic state provided citizens with everything they were required; they were not expected to actively participate or challenge the political and socio-economic *status quo*. In reviewing post-Soviet trends under Yeltsin, it is clear that, among other errors, he underestimated the resilience of Soviet legacies. This thesis has argued that President Putin has been far more adroit in his handling of the ‘Soviet’ in the Russian Federation today. Apart from curtailing the anti-Soviet narratives of the Yeltsin years, he has shown more continuity with Soviet legacies in a range of areas, from social policy and patriotism programmes, to nationalities policy and the Eurasian Union initiatives. Yet, in all this, Putin proceeds without a clear ideology; his essentially pragmatic style is also in keeping with the way post-Soviet Russians have grown tired of utopian promises and mobilising for a cause. Putin has pandered to a pre-existing conservative sentiment, offering a renewed social contract that bears comparison with the late Soviet period.



## Constituent elements of Russian national identity

### (i) *The memory of 1988-1998*

This brings us to the three key constituent elements of Russian national identity uncovered in this thesis. The first is the lived experience or transmitted memory of what occurred in Russia between 1988 and 1998. It is clear this period is a trauma still relatively fresh in the minds of both young and old respondents. This trauma is one reason why so many are concerned with 'stability'; they have access to either personal or transmitted memory of an 'abnormal' phase of the country's history, where the state fell apart, millions were impoverished, the few got rich and criminal gangs ran wild. Many clearly merge perestroika, the collapse and the nineties into one downward lurch in the nation's history.

Understandings of 'why this happened to us' influence attitudes to political change in Russia today. Much of what is 'normal' and 'abnormal' is worked out with reference to this period as an 'abnormal' and 'undesirable' past. The key impact of memories of 1988-1998 is in supporting conservatism in the population. Many juxtapose the Putin period with the 'abnormality' of the nineties and support his leadership on rather simple grounds: he will keep things 'in order' and, while some improvements may or may not occur, most of all he is a guarantee that Russia will not return to the hell of the nineties. People clearly 'delegate' sweeping powers to the hands of the President in the hope he will deliver stability, order and security, disciplining the state in order that it should provide citizens with an at least minimally functional system in which to live.

In addition, it is clear that experience and memories of 1988-1998 are important to what kind of 'useable past' exists in Russia today. This can be seen in the reproduction of a *longue durée* view of history that portrays Russia as repeatedly falling into phases of *smuta* (chaos and disorder) due to the convergence of weak central leadership, hostile external forces and internal upheaval. The memory of 1988-1998 is important in giving the Putin foundational myth, with its focus on successfully ending *smuta* and the restoration of *derzhava* status, credibility among the great mass of people.

In all this, it must be underlined that this view of history does not contain the ideological component present in the Soviet period. Throughout this thesis we have seen how respondents tend to either reject or avoid strongly ideological positions, be it in foreign policy (*russkii mir*, Eurasianism), the neo-traditionalist turn in social policy, in attitudes to the Western doctrines of liberalism and democracy, or even in the very limited ways in which Russian exceptionalism or uniqueness was articulated. This allergy to ideological constructions is arguably a legacy of the 1988-1998 period, when, once again, Russians were asked to endure and sacrifice in the name of a great 'ism'.

## *(ii) Soviet legacies*

Another key constituent element in Russian national identity today is Soviet legacies. In answering the pleas of the many to restore 'normality', Putin does, in many ways, meet the demands of *Homo Sovieticus* living in the unfamiliar and unhappy terrain of post-Soviet Russian capitalism. For many respondents, living 'normally' is often framed in terms of how the Soviet man lived in the Brezhnev period, when a person was sure of the future and free to turn his back on politics. In this, ideology is not particularly desirable; it is more just background decoration to the central arrangement: a powerful paternalistic state 'looks after' a passive and risk-averse people. In this, being inactive in politics, refusing to take risks or assume responsibility by participation, is considered 'normal'. The essential conservatism of the late Soviet man has remained. This can be viewed in preferences for a Soviet-style patriotism that disdains political activism and ignores ideology while proclaiming deep love for the motherland and loyalty to the state's priorities. This basic stance of conservatism and non-involvement suggest the habits and phobias of *Homo Sovieticus* live on in Russia to a significant extent.

Soviet legacies also come into play when we consider the dominant view of the Russian nation today. This can be characterised as a Russocentric civic nation that incorporates important elements of Soviet nationalities policy rhetoric. This includes the rejection of ethnic nationalism as destructive, the idea that the Russians are a 'special people' that merge with other national groups, holding the national groups of Eurasia together in one happy family. Thus, the

hierarchy of Soviet times appears to persist in the minds of many people, which brings us to what is meant by ‘Russocentrism’. It is clear in this research that *rossiyanin* has not succeeded in replacing the term ‘*sovietskii narod*’ as a central unifier for a supraethnic civic nation. Instead, *russkii* appeals in far more profound ways as a unifier, but not in an ‘ethnic way’. Instead, it combines Soviet-era practices of viewing *russkii* as a supraethnic category based on culture and language with the modern discourse of the civic nation made up of citizens with rights and responsibilities.

While it is positive that most Russians lean towards the civic conception of nation than ethnic; Soviet legacies mean there is strong component of linguistic and cultural assimilation in this. Thus, while ordinary people across the board reject ‘nationalism’ and ethnic identities, there are important differences in generations. While older respondents were more likely to adhere to ‘internationalist’ positions in seeing all the people of the post-Soviet space as one, younger respondents often revealed strong assimilationist demands towards those seeking entry into the ‘Russian nation’. While these demands are made in the language of the civic nation, their exclusionist ‘Russocentric’ style is still clear. This thesis has shown that how ‘Russia as a multinational state’ is understood today is strongly linked to visions of the ‘normality’ existing in the Soviet period. The Soviet-era ‘Friendship of Nations’ is viewed as positive in the way it kept most national groups remaining on ‘their own lands’ while allowing migration to occur in very controlled and limited ways. Soviet migration policy was remembered as only allowing those able and willing to learn Russian and to respect the culture and traditions of the majority to live in Russia. While non-Russians are free to retain their own languages and cultures, they are expected to happily assimilate into the wider Russian cultural and linguistic space.

What makes the above Russocentric civic nation more problematic is when it is combined with a certain ‘imperial consciousness’. Common portrayals of Russia’s multi-ethnic past as peaceful and progressive indicate there has been little deconstruction of Russia’s imperial and colonial history. This appears to have effects on viewing Russia’s primacy in the Eurasian space as ‘natural’ and ‘given’; something not requiring elaboration. The rosy picture of the

Russian role in creating a happy ‘family of nations’ involves amnesia on certain elements. This ensures many Russians today view themselves as a ‘state-forming’ people with a special role among the ‘little peoples’. Again, this is a continuation of *Homo Sovieticus* with one important difference: the Soviet ideological element to this has been jettisoned and, to all appearances, has not been replaced with anything substantial.

Finally, the Soviet legacy looms large in visions of a ‘normal’ great power. The USSR’s image as a mighty state largely independent from the world economy and one half of a stable bipolar world order leaves important legacies in geopolitical identities. Many long for a *derzhava* capable of counterbalancing Western unilateral dominance, one that is self-reliant and self-sufficient. This way of understanding state power shows continuity with Soviet legacies in that it emphasises hard power in classic military and economic terms. This can also be found in longings for Russia insulate her economy from the shocks of world financial system, something that – even if it entails the loss of some consumer luxuries – will be for the good of the *derzhava*. Thus, Russia’s ability to withstand the current Western sanctions and successfully intervene in Syria suggest her greatpowerness is in order and more fitting with the normative standards of the Soviet state.

### *(iii) long running pre-Soviet trends*

The final element in Russian national identity highlighted in this thesis are pre-revolutionary trends which appear to have come back into focus in Russia today. First of all, this concerns the Slavophile-Westerniser debate that has swung in a clear direction. Part of this is a return to pre-revolutionary Slavophile traditions in viewing Russia as fundamentally different from both East and West, ending a period of uncertainty over Russia’s role in the world that has arguably gone on since the start of perestroika (1985) all the way up to the Ukraine crisis (2014). Claims it is ‘normal’ for Russia to be ‘different’ from the Western countries and play a ‘different’ role or have ‘special responsibilities’ are linked to pre-1917 narratives about Russia’s role in the world. In the current hegemonic discourse we find a clear neo-Slavophile turn that suggests Russia has a ‘special path’ and is, in some ways, civilizationaly

distinct. This Slavophile turn is in response to certain eternal ‘big’ questions, such as ‘Is Russia a European country?’, ‘Can Russians have democracy of the Western type?’ or ‘Is Russia a normal country?’. These tend to focus on the country’s global status and comparisons with the West. As in the nineteenth century, the West is still a vital constituent ‘Other’ for Russia’s dominant nationalist discourse. Yet, as has been mentioned above, this neo-Slavophile turn is not built on strong ideological foundations. Claims to civilizational distinctiveness were not clearly part of the hegemonic nationalist discourse uncovered in this thesis. In fact, neo-traditionalism and Orthodoxy did not emerge as an important foundational element of Russian national identity in the data pool of this research.

The other main pre-revolutionary element unearthed in this thesis was the age-old story of alienation between ‘educated’ Russians (Europeans) and the masses, where the former views the latter as backward, passive, unreliable and inert. This is combined with a great fear among the former of a rebellion (*bunt*) bursting out among the latter. Thus, the gap between the intelligentsia and the masses persists. A vital part of this is the tendency to talk about Russians abstractly; ‘Russians are passive’, ‘they can’t do this or that’. Thus, many educated urban Russians display a certain hopelessness in dealing with this ‘uncooperative mass’. This leaves some with the sense that the government is the only reliable instrument for managing a population in need of strong doses of authoritarianism to prevent disorder and the occurrence of what Pushkin famously termed ‘the Russian rebellion, pointless and ruthless’.<sup>115</sup> This sentiment plays into the general *zeitgeist* of conservatism in Russia today.

### **The Hegemonic Nationalist Discourse in Russia today**

This brings us to an outline of the current hegemonic nationalist discourse in Russia today, which is composed of four essential components. Firstly, we have the demand for order and progress, stability and security to ensure Russia is a ‘normal’ country that is based on memory of Russia experiencing collapse and turmoil, desperate to avoid another cycle of chaos. Secondly, we have

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<sup>115</sup> From the Novel ‘The Captain’s Daughter’ (1836). In Russian it is as follows: ‘Не приведи Бог видеть русский бунт, бессмысленный и беспощадный!’

conservatism that claims the need for strong centralisation and desire to retain *status quo*. This entails deep scepticism about civic participation, disinterest in politics or ideological constructs, support for pragmatic statist positions, as well as acceptance of the current social contract. This also includes conservatism towards territorial change, acceptance of the current holding pattern of Russia as large state and world power. In other words, this means to retain the imperial body intact, avoiding any loss of great power status but also, importantly, rejecting adventurism in world affairs. Thirdly, there is the recycling of key Soviet leitmotifs: the post-Soviet civic nation is non-ethnic and hostile to 'nationalism'. Russians are 'open' people, they mix with other peoples, although their inclusivism is mixed with strong assimilationist sentiment. Russians are the state-forming people, and the adjective *russkii* is used to describe a multi-ethnic people that are united in culture and language and, of course, in commitment to Putin's statist project. Finally, we have the salience of the West as the key external threat to the nation, demanding consolidation to hold its head above water and retain its great power status. In doing this, the nation is fundamentally defensive: the West is resisted and loss of influence or state breakdown in the Eurasian space is averted. The sense of fragility to Russia as a multinational state and fear of revolutions plays into this defensiveness strongly, as do emotional narratives about the West as a hostile anti-Russian force.

### *Challenging the status quo: anti-hegemonic visions*

While the above mainstream vision of the nation holds traction with large numbers, it is clearly challenged by a significant minority. This thesis has shown those who contest the *status quo* generally take different markers of normality. Firstly, they do not consider the late Soviet period to be 'normal'; instead they turn elsewhere, usually to the contemporary societies of the 'developed world' in the twenty-first century. Secondly, they do not tend to frame the social world against the negative experience of Russia's 'wild nineties'. Instead of anchoring one's visions of normality on the nineties as a 'ground zero' point, the epitome of 'abnormality', these respondents tended to look outside of Russia. Part of these different normative standards is a rejection of the Soviet man: he is condemned for paternalism and passivity, sympathised

with as a victim of a system that weeded out independent-minded people, but ultimately condemned as holding Russia back. This is a minority that fundamentally craves a new relationship between state and people, one where the people are more responsible, more active and can hold the state accountable and make it work for ‘them’.

In all of this, there is strong potential for a different kind of *longue durée* to emerge, which could support this minority’s differing normative standards. This has a fundamentally anti-Soviet flavour; one that views authoritarianism and paternalism as holding Russia back, one that views seventy-four years of communism as wasting the human potential of the nation. What ultimately blocks the emergence of the above view on Russian history is the normative split across social and generational lines. This research has suggested the split is not so purely along age lines but also relates to social frames. This was revealed in the family biographies of participants. Those respondents who told stories of how their families benefited from the Soviet modernization project often had experience of hardship and loss post-1991. Conversely, those with relatives repressed in the Soviet period were more likely to view the end of the USSR, whatever problems this caused, as a good thing.

The above normative split is very important in attitudes to state media in the Information War. Those respondents with divergent normative standards were generally far less likely to accept ‘state propaganda’ and often deconstructed state propaganda while lampooning the ignorance of the people (*narod*) or the heartland (*glubinka*). Criticism of Putin’s domestic policies was strongly articulated, as well as the awareness that foreign policy is used to distract people and produce an inflated sense of national pride. Thus, this anti-hegemonic discourse rejects state media and abstracts the Russian people: ‘they’ believe the propaganda, ‘they’ need Putin. The conclusion emerging from this is that it is the most backward, least educated Russians that follow the *status quo*. More research would be needed to draw firmer conclusions over how salient generational, social or cultural elements are to this question.

The second anti-hegemonic discourse that was noticeable in this study rejected foreign commitments and disliked the prioritisation of foreign over domestic

policy. The sentiment that resources should be spent on Russian citizens clashes with statist rhetoric. The refusal to accept the inclusion of labour migrants or the North Caucasus region also extended, for some at least, to the ‘Russians of the Near Abroad’, who were also viewed as not worthy of state resources. The central image of this discourse is that Russia is a poor country, her towns and villages are impoverished, essential services are barely adequate and, to top it all off, money is draining out of the state coffers for dubious reasons. This discourse may have increasing appeal given the current economic malaise and may pose a significant challenge the current dominant discourse.

### *The salience of geopolitics and greatpowerness in holding the equilibrium*

This thesis has argued that what ultimately holds the above anti-hegemonic discourses in check is geopolitics and greatpowerness. Statist and geopolitical priorities encourage people to swallow their dissatisfaction over inequality, unfairness and corruption and accept the priority should be peace, stability and securing Russia as a great power. Thus, a strong consensus on the West as a negative force in world affairs with anti-Russian tendencies is combined with the draw of great power nationalism. It must be underlined that this is not about reconstituting empire; as noted above there is little enthusiasm for ideologically motivated projects such as the Eurasian Union or *ruskkii mir*. This thesis has highlighted the primacy of emotions in popular geopolitics. Central to this is *ressentiment* towards the West and powerful emotional imagery of Russia being treated as ‘second-class’ or ‘servants’. Thus, the approval for the current course comes in positive terms: Russia is on a quest for equality and respect, the right to be recognised as an equal great power.

This thesis has also underlined the mobilising effects of certain external events (Maidan and Crimea). These allow a geopolitical vision to assume a tangible form and for people to ‘live’ and ‘experience’ the nation’s struggles and triumphs. Ultimately, these events have resulted in consolidation and a reaffirmation of loyalties. The equilibrium that currently exists is heavily reliant on the sense that Russia must ‘hold the fort’ and not surrender. This entails: (i) holding the world’s largest state together and avoiding state



disintegration; (ii) pursuing the zero-sum battle for equality with the Western powers, (iii) the feeling that Russia, due to her huge size, will be a special kind of 'great power' that cannot 'join' the West. Thus, such sentiments, along with emotional narratives and external events, help hold in check anti-hegemonic discourse.

### *Final words*

As the decade draws to a close and we approach thirty years of Russia 'since the USSR', there is the sense that the post-Soviet phase is now, in many ways complete. The task before us is to adequately conceptualise what this period has left us with. For one, the 'burden' of Soviet legacies has not been 'overcome'; the forms, practices and legacies of the 'Soviet man' live on in mutated forms in the minds of many Russians. The 'posting' of socialism did not produce the result hoped for by those expecting Russia's transition towards Western models. Instead this transition has been heavily shaped by Russia's pre-revolutionary traditions, Soviet legacies and the experience of the post-Soviet transition (1988-1998).

At the same time, Russia is still in transition with regards to 'imperial consciousness' and great power nationalism. Russia's *post-imperium* still reproduces and retains much of the Romanov and Soviet heritage minus a clearly elaborated state ideology. This has occurred in conditions where the end of the Cold War 'three worlds system' has not resulted in Russia's inclusion into the 'first world'. Instead, the three-way division of the Cold War has rather quickly been reconstituted into 'the West', the BRIC countries and the 'rest'. Ways of conceptualising the world, reinforced over decades of the Cold War, have proven far more resilient than many expected.

Ultimately, this thesis cannot predict the future course of Russian identity. Instead, its main goal has been to outline its current condition and explain why people adopt certain positions. A larger data set would be needed to explore whether the normative split in respondents is prevalent across Russia or merely in this urban, 'European' part of Russia. More work is also needed to test the role generational differences and socio-economic conditions play in the kind of

discourses people absorb and reproduce. Over the longer term, it remains to be seen whether the experience of 1988-1999 will lose salience and if, as Soviet-born people die off one by one, the transmission belt of Soviet legacies will be disrupted. The conclusions of this thesis would suggest it is unrealistic to expect the extinction of Soviet forms, practices, legacies. Instead, they will mutate and evolve, ensuring their survival.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the current reliance on geopolitics and the struggle with the West is a highly unstable course. The sense that this struggle is 'done' or 'has run its course' would destabilise the equilibrium. The failure of any 'ism' to take root may cause problems for the current *status quo* in the longer term. Ultimately, we must wait for time to take its course to discover how the Putin-era status quo will develop. It is hoped this thesis has shed light on the need to account for the picture 'from below'. Further work on the appeal of the 'nation' in the twenty-first century must take into account the emotions, myths and visions of normality prevailing within a given community in a given period.

## **Appendix 1: Elite Interviews (Summer 2014, Winter 2015, Moscow and St. Petersburg)**

Georgy Filimonov, Professor in the Department of the Theory and History of International Relations, Founding member of Anti-Maidan Movement (Moscow)

Igor Chubais, Historian and Writer (Moscow)

Lev Gudkov, Head of Levada Centre (Moscow)

Stanislav Vorobyov, Head of Russian Imperial Movement (SPB)

Dmitri Demushkin, Leader of *Russkie* (ethno-nationalist party), (Moscow)

Konstantin Krylov, Party Secretary of the National Democratic Party, (Moscow)

Sergey Markedonov, Director of the Department for Problems of Ethnic Relations at the Institute for Political and Military Analysis in Moscow, (Moscow)

Prof. Alexey Miller, Historian (Moscow)

Valery Solovei, Historian and Publicist, (Moscow)

Maxim Kalashnikov, Journalist, Writer and nationalist activist, (Elite interview, Moscow)

Andrei Savelyev, Nationalist politician and former Rodina party deputy, (Moscow)

Emil Pain, Political Scientist, (Elite interview, Moscow)

Lev Lurie (Writer and Historian, SPB)

## Appendix 2: Original pilot project interview questions for both age groups before starting fieldwork

*Note: This original set of questions were aimed at exploring which approaches and kind of topic would stimulate discussion. A large number of these questions were subsequently removed as they were either too 'leading', related to topics many did not think about or were too closed and led to yes/no/maybe responses*

### View of Russian history

- What do you feel are the most significant/negative/positive periods of Russian history in the twentieth century?
- How did you feel about debates on the USSR in WWII and the threatened closure of TV Channel *Dozhd*?
- What do you think is the main lesson to be learned from the Soviet era?
- Who or what brought down the USSR in your view?

### Membership of the Russian nation

- Do you agree with the constitution that Russians should be a multinational people?
- Would you identify with the term 'russkii' or 'rossiyane'? What do you think Russia should be a common home for many ethnic groups? Can one become Russian (Russkii)?
- What do you think about Russians in the near abroad? What should the approach of the Russian government be?

### Interethnic relations

- What is your experience of interacting with non-ethnic Russians on an everyday basis?
- What do you think of the current state policy? What do you think about immigration and the demographics of Russia?
- Are migrants well integrated into Russian society?

### Territorial boundaries of Russian nation

- Are the current boundaries of the Russian Federation the 'correct' or 'natural' boundaries of the Russian nation? How could it be altered?
- Some say funding of certain regions (North Caucasus) should be limited, your view? Must the Federation be held together at all costs?
- What is your opinion on the possibility of uniting Russia, parts of Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan?

### Russian role in world

- What should Russia's role in the world be? Does Russia have a unique path?
- Is Russia part of Europe? Should she look for closer partnership with the EU?
- What do you think about the Eurasian Union and Custom's Union? Is this restoration of a new USSR-style entity?
- Do you think it is important to be a 'great power'?

### The best social, economic, political and cultural configuration for Russia

- Why do you think Putin is popular? What is your opinion of Yeltsin, Gorbachev in comparison?

- Have you heard the term 'Managed democracy'? Is it a good thing?
- What did the Sochi Olympics mean for you/Russians in general?
- How did you feel about the protests on Bolotnaya in 2011-2012?
- What should the priorities be for Russia's future development? What should resources be spent on?

## Appendix 3: Final version of interview guide (age group 20-30) in Russian developed by September 2014

Interviews for the current Post-Soviet generation (those aged 18-30 today)

Давайте начнем с истории вашей семьи – не могли бы Вы кратко рассказать, откуда Ваши предки, где они жили, работали, служили? ... Расскажите о себе – образование, работа. Чем Ваши родители занимались в период перестройки? Какие у них взгляды на реформы и развал СССР? Вы выросли в 90-е, что вы помните о той атмосфере в семье, спорах и разговорах? Чья позиция было вам близка?

Let's begin with your family's story – could you tell me about your parents, grandparents, where they lived/worked/served? Could you tell me about your background/education/job? What were your parents doing in perestroika? Did they have views on these reforms and the fall of the USSR? You grew up in the nineties, what do you remember of this period, discussions, arguments.. whose position was closer to yours?

View of Russian history

- Если смотреть на историю России XX века, когда, по Вашему, Россия была на правильном пути развития? Какие периоды были сами удачными или неудачными для России? Looking at twentieth century Russian history, when, in your view, was Russia on the right path of development? Is there a period you think was particularly successful/positive?
- В вашей жизни, какие исторические событие были сами важными для России? In your lifetime, what historical events were most important for Russia?
- Путин назвал развал 91-го года «геополитической катастрофой» Для других это было «победой демократии»? - А для вас? Putin called 1991 a 'geopolitical tragedy'. Others called it the 'victory of democracy' – what is it for you?
- История России не простая – дважды случились развалы государства – были великие достижения и провалы – как вы считаете, каков главный урок XX века для России? The history of Russia is not straightforward – twice states have collapsed – there have been great achievements and failures – what do you think we might raise as one important lesson of the twentieth century for Russia?

Membership of the Russian nation

- Что для Вас означают слова – «Националист» и «патриот»? «Нация» и «государство» - есть разница? Как Вы относитесь к так называемым «русским националистам»? What do the words 'patriot' and 'nationalist' mean to you? What about 'nation' and 'state'? How do you view the so-called 'Russian nationalists'?

- Если спросили ваших родителей в 80-х «кто вы» - возможно что они бы ответили «я советский человек» - а не «я русский» - было такое понятие что советские люди они многонациональные и работают вместе чтобы строить коммунизм – а если вас спросит «кто вы»? как вы отвечаете? ( «я россиянин» или «я русский»? ) If I asked your parents in the 1980's 'who are you?', they may have answered 'I am Soviet' – there was this sense of all being Soviet working together to build Communism – Today we don't have Soviet/Russian we have russkii and rossiiyanin. If I ask you 'who are you' how would you answer?
- Вы согласны с тем, что написано в Конституции: Россия – многонациональная страна то есть «общий дом многих народов» или с этим что-то не так? Например, «Россия должна быть государством русских людей в первую очередь»? Do you agree with what is written in the constitution, 'Russia is a multinational country'? In other words a home for many different peoples? Or is there something wrong with this? Like for example, some say Russia should be a state for the russkii people in the first instance?
- В советские времена – можно было просто выбрать национальность и стать «русским» в своем паспорте. «отец еврей, мать татарка – а я сам русский» А сегодня, что определяет «русскость»? In the Soviet times, a person could choose there nationality in their passport and become Russian, like the phrase 'My dad is Jewish, my mother is Tatar but I myself am Russian'. What about today, how would you define 'who is Russian'?
- В Латвии 80% латышей и 20% нелатышей – но никто не говорит, что Латвия – многонациональное государство – В России 80% населения – русские, но РФ - многонациональное государство – все в порядке с этим? In Latvia 80% of the country is made up of ethnic Latvians, 20% are non-ethnic Latvians. The proportions are similar in Russia. But the Russian Federation is a multinational country. Is this fair?
- В 91-м году появилось новое государство – РФ – в этот момент, многие, которые считали себя советскими или русскими оказались за пределами РФ - Что Вы думаете о положении русских в ближнем зарубежье? Они часть Российской нации? У России есть ответственность за них? In 1991 a new state emerged, the RF, at that moment many who thought of themselves as Russians ended up outside of the RF borders – what do you think about the situation of the Russians of the near abroad? Are they part of the Russian nation? Does Russia have responsibility for them?
- Были, конечно, советские ценности – довольно четко сформулированные – а сегодня, что объединяет Россиян сегодня, какие ценности? There were certain Soviet values, pretty clearly defined. What about today, what unites Russians today, what values are there?
- Как вы понимаете разницу между русскими и «западными» людьми? How do you understand the differences between Russian and 'Western' people? Are there differences?
- Если сравнить ваше поколение с поколением ваших родителей – вы можете называть одну положительную и одну отрицательную разницу между вами? If we compare your generation with that of your parents, can you name one positive and one negative difference?

Interethnic relations

- Раньше в СССР была политика «дружба народов» - люди разных национальностей должны были жить мирно – сегодня все по-прежнему? Back in the USSR there was a policy of 'Friendship of Nations' – people of different nationalities were to live in peace – is this still going on today?
- Как Вы смотрите на нынешнюю государственную политику касательно иммиграции и демографии? Беспокоит ли Вас демографический кризис? What do you think of the current state policies on immigration and demographics? Are you worried by any demographic crisis?
- Легко ли мигранты интегрируются в российское общество? Do migrants find it easy to integrate into Russian society?
- Пора уже вводить визовый режим на все страны постсоветского пространства чтобы уменьшить поток мигрантов? Is it time to introduce some visa regulations between the Post-Soviet states to reduce the migrant flow?
- Что надо делать, чтобы укрепить народное единство в России? Чтобы люди разных национальностей чувствовали себя членами одной нации – то есть «мы все россияне» What should be done to strengthen unity in Russia? In order for people of different nationalities to feel members of one nation?
- По вашим наблюдениям – что делается в Вашем городе для сохранения гражданского мира, межнационального и межрелигиозного согласия? What have you seen being done to preserve civic peace, interethnic and interreligious peace?

#### Territorial boundaries of Russian nation

- Нынешние границы РФ правильно отражают естественные границы российской/русской нации? Как, по-вашему мнению, они должны выглядеть? Do the current borders of the Russian Federation reflect the natural extent of the Russian nation? How should they look?
- Как смотрите на вхождение Крым в состав РФ? Вы поддерживаете создание «Новороссии»? What do you think about the addition of Crimea to the Russian Federation? Do you support the creation of 'Novorossiya'?
- Если республика Татарстана и нижегородская область получают разные субсидии из центра (особенно для развития татарской культуры) это правильно? Вы слышали лозунг “Хватит кормить Северный Кавказ?” If the republic of Tatarstan and Nizhny Novgorod region receive different subsidies from the centre ( to pay for the development of Tatar culture, for example), is this correct? Have you heard the slogan 'stop feeding the Caucasus'?
- Что для вас означает «Русский Мир»? What does the term 'Russkii mir' mean to you?

#### Russian role in world

- Является ли Россия частью Европы? Должна ли она искать более тесное сотрудничество с Европейским Союзом? Is Russia part of Europe? Should she seek closer cooperation with the EU?



- Некоторые говорят, что у России «особенный путь». Что приходит на ум когда вы это слышите? Some say Russia has a 'special path'. What comes to mind when you hear that?
- Советский союз играл определенную роль в мире – глава социалистического блока, вторая сверхдержава - Какую роль Россия должна играть сегодня на мировой арене? The USSR played a particular role in the world – the head of the socialist bloc, the second superpower... what role should Russia play today on the world stage?
- У России, кажется, всегда была какая-то миссия – «России нужен выход на море – России нужна новая столица – в СССР – надо строить коммунизм – полететь в космос – поднимать целину» какой может быть следующий мега-проект – или надо уже забывать о таких вещах? Looking at history, it seems Russia has always had some kind of mission – e.g. Russia needs access to the sea, a new capital, build communism, reach space, the virgin lands campaign. What could be Russia's next mega project? Or is it time to forget such things?
- Как Вы смотрите на создание Евразийского союза и Таможенного союза? What do you think about the foundation of the Eurasian Union and Custom's Union?
- Хотел поговорить о кризисе на Украине – в чем суть конфликт между западом и Россией – что хочет ЕС и США в этом - Как вы считаете, что в первую очередь стоит за действиями российского руководства в отношении Крыма и Украины? Considering the Ukraine crisis, what do you think is at the heart of the conflict between Russia and the West? What does the EU and USA want? What motivates the Russian leadership here?
- Что Вы думаете по поводу «информационной войны», которая якобы идет в информационном пространстве? What do you think of the information war that appears to be going on in the media?

The best social, economic, political and cultural configuration for Russia

- Почему Путин пользуется популярностью у народа? Как он отличается от других вождей, как Ельцин или Горбачев? Why do you think Russia is popular, how does he differ from previous leaders?
- Вы слышали термин “управляемая/суверенная демократия”? Как вы понимаете политическую систему в России? Это не западная и не советская демократия ведь... Have you heard the term 'managed/sovereign democracy'? How to understand the political system in Russia – How does it compare to 'Western' or 'Soviet' versions of democracy?
- Какое значение имели Олимпийские игры в Сочи для Вас и для россиян вообще? What did the Olympic Games in Sochi mean to you and Russians in general?
- Как относитесь к протестам на Болотной площади конца 2011-2012 годов? Политическая оппозиция нужна для правильно функционирования политической системы? How did you feel about the protests on Bolotnaya 2011-12? Is a political opposition needed for a functioning political system?
- Какие главные задачи стоят перед Россией сегодня? На что надо тратить ее ресурсы? What are the main goals for Russia today, what should she spend her resources on?

## **Appendix 4: Final version of interview guide (aged 18-30 in 1991) in Russian developed by September 2014**

Давайте начнем с истории вашей семьи – не могли бы Вы кратко рассказать, откуда Ваши предки, где они жили, работали, служили? ... Расскажите о себе – образование, работа

Чем занимались в период перестройки? Какие у вас взгляды были на реформы и развал СССР?

Let's begin with your family's story – could you tell me about your parents, grandparents, where they lived/worked/served? Could you tell me about your background/education/job? What did you do during perestroika? What were your views on these reforms and the fall of the USSR?

View of Russian history

- В перестройке начались переоценки истории - Как Вы смотрели на дебаты о роли Сталина и Ленина в 1980-х годах? Perestroika witnessed re-evaluations of history – how did view debates on the role of Stalin and Lenin in the 1980's?
- Когда Россия была в правильном направлении развития? Какие периоды были сами удачными или неудачными для России? Looking at twentieth century Russian history, when, in your view, was Russia on the right path of development? Is there a period you think was particularly successful/positive?
- В вашей жизни, какие исторические событие были сами важными для России? In your lifetime, what historical events were most important for Russia?
- История России не простая – дважды случились развалы государства – были великие достижения и провалы – как вы считаете, каков главный урок XX века для России? The history of Russia is not straightforward – twice states have collapsed – there have been great achievements and failures – what do you think we might raise as one important lesson of the twentieth century for Russia?

The best social, economic, political and cultural configuration for Russia

- В какие аспекты советской идеологии Вы верили/(или) не верили, принимали – отрицали? Есть ли у Вас опыт с организациями, которые поддерживали режим (комсомол и пионерия)? What aspects of Soviet ideology did you believe/accept/reject? Did you belong to any organisations supporting the regime?
- Что Вы чувствовали, когда начиналась перестройка? Были ли какие-то явные недостатки в советском строе, которые Вы видели собственными глазами? What did you feel at the start of perestroika? Did you notice some defects in the USSR with your own eyes?
- Как надо было проводить перестройку? Какие реформы нужны сегодня в России? How should perestroika have been done? What reforms are needed in Russia today?
- Было ли больше/меньше солидарности, единства и коллективизма в обществе, чем сейчас? Советские ценности ушли или сохранились в Российском обществе? Was there

more/less solidarity/unity/collectivism in society back then? Have Soviet values left/stayed in Russian society today?

- Принимали ли Вы участие в каких-либо первичных политических организациях? (неформалы) Почему (нет)? Вы помните аргументы тех, кто был против (и за) реформ? Did you take part in any political organisations? Do you remember the arguments of those for and against reform?
- Как Вы смотрели на путч августа 1991-го? Народ не победил, когда путч провалился? События в 91-ом были для Вас тогда «победой демократии»? Путин назвал развал 91-го года «геополитической катастрофой» - Вы с этим согласны? What did you think of the August Putsch? Did the people win when the putsch failed? Putin called 1991 a 'geopolitical tragedy'. Others called it the 'victory of democracy' – what is it for you?
- Считаете ли Вы, что русские люди многое потеряли за последние 20 лет? Do you think the Russian lost/gained a lot in the last twenty odd years since 1991?
- Принимали участие в политических группах в 90-х? Как работала демократия в 90-х для вас? Как насчет сегодня? Did you take part in politics in the nineties? How did this new democracy work in your experience? How about now?
- Какие главные задачи стоят перед Россией сегодня? На что надо тратить ее ресурсы? What are the main goals for Russia today, what should she spend her resources on?

#### Membership of the Russian nation

- Что для Вас означают слова – «Националист», «патриот» и «национал-патриот»? есть разница? What do the words 'patriot' and 'nationalist' mean to you?
- Вы чувствовали себя больше русским или советским человеком? Были ли какие-либо противоречия в этих понятиях? На чем была основана “русскость” или “советскость”? Did you feel Russian and/or Soviet? Was there any contradictions in this? What was Russianess/Sovietness based on?
- Вы согласны с тем, что написано в конституции: Россия – многонациональная страна то есть «общий дом многих народов» или «Россия должна быть государством русских людей в первую очередь»? Do you agree with what is written in the constitution, 'Russia is a multinational country'? In other words a home for many different peoples? Or is there something wrong with this? Like for example, some say Russia should be a state for the russkii people in the first instance?
- В 91-ого года появилось новое государство – РФ – в этот момент, многие, которые считали себя советскими или русскими оказались за пределами РФ - Что Вы думаете о положении русских в ближнем зарубежье? У России есть ответственность за них? In 1991 a new state emerged, the RF, at that moment many who thought of themselves as Russians ended up outside of the RF borders – what do you think about the situation of the Russians of the near abroad? Are they part of the Russian nation? Does Russia have responsibility for them?

## Interethnic relations

- Помните лозунг “Дружба народов”? Как это работало для Вас на деле? Do you remember the slogan 'Friendship of Nations'? How did that work in practice?
- Вы слышали в советские времена, что некоторые жители РСФСР чувствовали себя ущемленными или обиженными за состояние областей в России, и что якобы тратили больше средств на другие республики? «Россия должна кормить себя – не других за счет себя – Россия живет хуже, чем работает» Did you ever hear some residents of the RSFSR felt annoyed by the state of Russian regions, that too much money was spent on other republics?
- Как вам кажется, говоря о межнациональных отношениях, мало/много изменилось с времен дружбы народов? When we look at interethnic relations, how much has changed since the days of Friendship of Nations?
- Как Вы смотрите на нынешнюю государственную политику касательно иммиграции и демографии? Беспокоит ли Вас демографический кризис? What do you think of the current state policies on immigration and demographics? Are you worried by any demographic crisis?

## Territorial boundaries of Russian nation

- Вы чувствовали, что РСФСР была “Вашей” республикой – примерно так же, как и Казахская ССР была для казаха? Did you feel that the RSFSR was 'your' republic, like say the Kazakh SSR was for a Kazakh?
- Считаете ли Вы, что границы РСФСР совпадали с существующей российской нацией? Или какая-то часть российской нации была оставлена за их пределами? Сегодня? Do you think the borders of the RSFSR fit with the actual existing Russian nation back then and now? Should some extra part be included/excluded?
- Что для вас означает «Русский Мир»? What does the term 'russkii mir' mean to you?
- Как смотрите на вхождение Крым в состав РФ? Вы поддерживаете создание «Новороссии»?
- Как Вы смотрите на создание Евразийского союза и Таможенного союза? What do you think about the foundation of the Eurasian Union and Custom's Union?

## Russian role in world

- Какую роль играл СССР в Море? Как Вы смотрели на переговоры по разоружению, сближение с Западом? What role did the USSR play in the world? How did you respond to the improvement in relations with the West and disarmament talks?
- Считали ли Вы себя “интернационалистом”? Какая реакция была у Вас к призыву “выполнить интернациональный долг в Афганистане”? Did you consider yourself an internationalist? What did you think of the intervention in Afghanistan?
- Как Вы смотрели на растущий “национализм» в некоторых республиках? What did you think of the growing 'nationalism' of some Soviet republics?

- Является ли Россия частью Европы? Должна ли она искать более тесное сотрудничество с Европейским Союзом? Is Russia part of Europe? Should she seek closer cooperation with the EU?
- Некоторые говорят, что у России «особенный путь». Что приходит на ум когда вы это слышите? Some say Russia has a 'special path'. What comes to mind when you hear that?
- Советский союз играл определенную роль в мире. Какую роль Россия должна играть сегодня на мировой арене? The USSR played a particular role in the world – the head of the socialist bloc, the second superpower... what role should Russia play on the world stage?
- У России, кажется, всегда была какая-то миссия – «России нужен выход на море – России нужна новая столица – в СССР – надо строить коммунизм – полететь в космос – поднимать целину» какой может быть следующий мега-проект – или надо уже забывать о таких вещах? Looking at history, it seems Russia has always had some kind of mission – e.g. Russia needs access to the sea, a new capital, build communism, reach space, the virgin lands campaign. What could be Russia's next mega project? Or is it time to forget such things?
- Хотел поговорить о кризисе на Украине, в чем суть конфликт между западом и Россией? Что хочет ЕС и ШСА в этом? Как вы считаете, что в первую очередь стоит за действиями российского руководства в отношении Крыма и Украины? Considering the Ukraine crisis, what do you think is at the heart of the conflict between Russia and the West? What does the EU and USA want? What motivates the Russian leadership here?

## **Appendix 5: Message posted on Social media to attract respondents**

Друзья, я приехал в Нижний Новгород из Шотландии. Цель моей поездки – сбор материала для своей докторской диссертации о том, как меняется самосознание и самоидентичность людей в России в современную эпоху после стольких изменений в стране. В государственном строе, в идеологии, в национальной идее и в жизненных ценностях людей. Именно поэтому я ищу людей, с которыми я мог бы говорить об этом и узнавать их мнения, взгляды на свою жизнь и жизнь в стране в целом.

Я провожу исследование в трех городах: Москва, Нижний Новгород и Санкт-Петербург. Мой подход – это сравнительный анализ двух поколений – первая группа – советское поколение (люди, которым было 18-30 в 1991) – вторая – нынешняя молодежь – люди, которым 18-30 сегодня. Я ищу самых разных людей, чтобы результаты были как можно более объективными. Обычно встреча длится около часа, но все зависит от вашего свободного времени. Это не опрос, а просто беседа, в которой вы рассказываете о том, какой вы видите свою жизнь и жизнь вокруг.

Я готов встретиться с вами в любом удобном вам месте и в любое время. Успех моего исследования зависит от вашего интереса и готовности поделиться своим взглядом на мир со мной. Поэтому буду очень признателен, если смогу встретиться с кем-то из вас.

Friends, I have come to Nizhny Novgorod from Scotland. The aim of my journey is to collect material for my doctoral dissertation on how identity and consciousness is changing in the current period after so many changes in the country. In the state system, ideology, national idea, and values of everyday people. That is why I am looking for people I can talk with about their views of life here and their opinions on the country in general. My research will take place in three cities: Nizhny Novgorod, Moscow and St. Petersburg. My approach involves a comparative analysis of two generations: the first is young people today (18-30), the second the last Soviet youth (18-30 in 1991). I am looking for people from all different backgrounds to make the results as objective as possible. Usually an interview would last around an hour, but it all depends on how much time you have. This is not a survey, but a conversation, in which you talk about how you see life and what is around you.

I am happy to meet with you at any place and time that is suitable for you. The success of my research depends on your interest and readiness to share your views of the world with me.

Therefore I would be very grateful to have the chance to meet some of you.

## Appendix 6: Table of interviewees' socio-economic data

Name	Place of Residence	Education	Employment	Age at time of interview
Viktor	NN	Higher	Student, International Relations	22
Eva	NN	Incomplete higher	Unemployed	26
Pieter	NN	Higher	Architect, state contracts	29
Vika	NN	Higher	Chemist in State Company	29
Vladislav	NN	Higher	Post Doctoral Researcher (Middle Eastern Studies)	28
Julia	NN	Higher	Chemist in State Company	29
Boris	NN	Higher	Computer Programmer	22
Tanya	NN	Secondary	Nursery Nurse	29
Arkady	NN	Higher	Computer Software Development	27
Nadia	NN	Higher	Lecturer in Asian Studies	26
Alexei	NN (Moved from Siberia)	Higher	Computer Programming (Tester)	23
Ksenia	NN	Higher	Law student	22
Vlad	NN	Higher	Marketing	26
Inna	NN, from Dzershinsk	Higher (incomplete)	Factory worker	28
Sergei	NN	Higher (incomplete)	Business Development	29

Elena	NN, from Dzershinsk	Higher	Accountant	29
Stanislav	NN	Higher	Electrical Engineer	22
Dina	NN (from Sarov)	Higher	Student International Relations	22
Yaroslav	NN	Higher	Student (IT) and small businessman	23
Katya	NN	Higher	Politics Student	22
Marina	NN	Higher	Language Teacher	25
Svetlana	NN (from Tula)	Higher	Postgraduate researcher in sociology	25
Anastasia	NN	Higher	Economics student	21
Igor	NN	Higher	International Relations lecturer	41
Ludmilla	NN	Higher (incomplete)	Head of University Dormitory	50
Grigori	NN	Higher, Engineer in USSR	Computer Programmer	49
Vera	NN	Higher	IT Project Manager	43
Anatoly	NN	Higher	History Lecturer	55
Galina	NN	Higher	Sociology Department	40
Pavel	NN	Higher, engineer in USSR	IT specialist	58
Olga	NN	Secondary	Factory Worker	55
Nikita	NN	Secondary	Ventilation System Salesman	42
Matvei	NN	Secondary	Double Glazing Installations	43



Leonid	NN	Higher	Religious History Lecturer	45
Denis	NN	Higher (incomplete)	Journalist	41
Gennady	NN	Higher	Researcher in International Relations, ex-journalist	41
Yegor	NN	Higher (incomplete)	Newspaper editor	44
Ilia	NN	Higher	Owner of import-export business	46
Artem	NN	Higher, engineer in USSR	Computer Programmer	49
Arseny	NN	Higher	Sales in Oil Company	41
Vitaly	NN	Secondary, served in army	Retired businessman	42
Valery	NN	Higher	Business development in state company	40
Natalya	NN	Higher, electrical engineer USSR.	Accountant	50
Timur	Moscow	Higher	Post Graduate researcher	26
Yuri	Moscow	Higher	Sales Manager	45
Roman	Moscow	Higher	Journalist, Kommersant	28
Julia	Moscow	Higher	Human rights activist	24
Zhanna	Moscow	Higher	Journal Editor	43
Zoya	Moscow	Higher	Head of Cultural centre	49
Mikhail	Moscow	Higher	Actor	29
Konstantin	Moscow	Higher	State Municipal management specialist,	27

			former Nashi member	
Erik	Moscow	Higher	Screenwriter	54
Ruslan	SPB	Higher	Computer Programmer	57
Marta	SPB	Higher (incomplete), housewife	Retired	54
Anton	SPB	Secondary, Ex-army officer	Small Business Owner	52
Lubov	SPB	Higher	Private Tutor	43
Sergei	SPB	Higher	Marketing Development	40
Julia	SPB	Higher (incomplete)	Assistant in Film set production	47
Lev	SPB	Higher, Mathematics specialist in USSR	Computer Programmer	46
Elisa	SPB	Secondary	Head of Sports Centre	58
Semyon	SPB	Higher, ex-dissident, samizdat	Psychologist	54
Nikolay	SPB	Higher, Komsomol chairman	Retired, ex-policeman	52
Maxim	SPB	Secondary, black Market trader in USSR	Shop owner	56
Sergei	SPB	Higher	Lecturer in Art History	53
Ivan	SPB	Secondary	Retired miner	55
Andrei	SPB	Higher, Physics student in USSR	Computer Programmer	51
Oleg	SPB	Secondary	Construction site foreman	49

Kirill	SPB	Higher (incomplete)	Ex-Stock Broker and political activist	40
Nadezhda	SPB	Higher (incomplete)	Nanny	30
Boris	SPB	Higher (incomplete)	Radio presenter	25
Olga	SPB	Higher	Costume designer	26
Igor	SPB	Higher	Language teacher	26
Alexandra	SPB	Higher	Psychotherapist	30
Evgeny	SPB	Higher	Sales manager in construction company	30
Sasha	SPB	Higher	Lecturer in History	28
Dmitri	SPB	Higher (incomplete)	Actor	28
Marina	SPB	Higher	Manager in Software Company	29
Mikhail	SPB	Higher	IT admin	24
Zakhar	SPB	Higher (incomplete)	Manager in export company	29
Pavel	SPB	Higher	Import-Export business	27
Stepan	SPB	Higher	Physics student	22
Alexei	SPB	Higher	Assistant to deputy of Local Assembly	25
Alexander	SPB	Higher	Business development manager	25
Daria	SPB	Higher (incomplete)	Events manager for local government	28
Vyacheslav	SPB	Higher (incomplete)	Head of corporate security	53

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