Russian National Identity and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis

by Taras Kuzio

The history and geography of Russia led to a national identity which relies on terms such as empire and nationalism. At the same time the identities of Russia and the former USSR have never been separated and thus the age-long desire for the status of an internationally recognised great power still lingers. This identity concept, the specific form of nationalism, and the perception that "the West" constitutes Russia's negative "other" are crucial to understand Russia's course in the Ukraine crisis. Moreover, this composition of characteristics will define Russian political culture in the foreseeable future.

The key to understanding contemporary Russia and its policies towards Ukraine that culminated in the 2014-2015 crisis is the degree to which the country's history was radically different to that of Western Europe. England and France built overseas empires after they created nation-states in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They retreated from overseas colonies after World War II to their respective nation-states. England and Scotland created a relatively equal union in 1707 where Scotland was permitted to maintain a separate legal and education system and currency. The 1654 Ukraine-Russian Treaty of Peryaslav is a source of contention to this day as Russia viewed it not as an equal union but as Ukraine's submission.

Russia, however, never built a nation-state before it embarked on building the world's largest land empire. Therefore, history and geography made it difficult to retreat from (the vision of) an empire. Nevertheless, Russian nationalism was quite similar to English nationalism in being submerged within union identities and as both peoples never developed separatist movements. Applying 'nationalism' to describe Russian and English unionism, however, is a misnomer; England, for example, never had the equivalent of the SNP (Scottish National Party) and until the 1990s English football fans mainly carried the Union Jack flag – the flag of the United Kingdom of Great Britain. Like the Russians, the English were never separatists and therefore they were different to the Irish, Scots and Welsh who have had separatist political forces. The similarity between Russian and English identities changed in the last two decades with the rise of English nationalism and the growing popularity of the English Cross of St. George flag. The victory of the leave campaign in the June 2016 British referendum on the EU was in many ways a result of the revival of this English nationalism which campaigned for "independence" from Brussels (in Scotland the majority voted for remain).

Russian nationalism has been unable to separate itself from unionism. In the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) many were falsely termed "Russian nationalists" as they never sought independence for the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (SFSR). Russian dissidents who did seek independence such as Vladimir Bukovsky and Andrei Amalrik could be counted on one hand. "Official Russian nationalists" were free to work within the Soviet system during the last three decades of the USSR, when Vladimir Putin was being socialised and trained as a KGB officer, with a base in "thick journals" such as Nash Sovremenyk and Molodaya Gvardiya. During the 1980s they were active in the Soviet Anti-Zionist movement which was camouflaged anti-Semitism. "Unofficial Russian nationalists" occasionally fell foul of the KGB but they

advocated the USSR to become a Russian nation-state and not an independent Russian state; that is why they were empire savers and not separatists.

Another comparison could be made between Russia and Turkey which emerged as a nation-state in the early 1920s from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Yet, no Russian equivalent of Turkey's nationalist leader Mustafa Kemal Ataturk emerged in 1991, when the USSR disintegrated and when conditions considerably differed from those after World War I. Ataturk's Turkey sought to distance itself from the backward Ottoman imperial legacy and to modernise the country by building a Westernised nation-state. In contrast, since 2000, Putin's regime has portrayed the Westernizing 1990s in negative terms as "chaos" when a weak Russia was allegedly put down and not respected by the West.

Post-Soviet Russian leaders have not sought to fully distance themselves from the former USSR. They coveted the successor status of the Russian Federation to the USSR at the United Nations (UN) where it gave them a continued seat at the UN Security Council. This, in turn, was supported by Western powers because Russia inherited the bulk of the Soviet nuclear weapons and from 1996, after the denuclearisation of Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan, became the sole Eurasian nuclear power.

The USSR was constructed in a very different manner to two other communist federations: Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Whereas the fourteen non-Russian republics of the USSR—similar to the republics within Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia—did possess such republican institutions as a Communist Party, Communist Youth League or Academy of Sciences, the Russian SFSR did not (with 3.5 million members, the Communist Party in the Ukrainian republic was the largest within the Soviet Union). Although Borys Yeltsin began to build Russian republican institutions after he was elected president in June 1991, the Russian SFSR had too little time to complete this process before the USSR disintegrated a few months later.

Belarus was similar to Ukraine in possessing republican institutions and therefore possessing a republican identity separate to the USSR. At the same time, Belarus was also different to Ukraine because its formative nation-building took place within the USSR; hence, a Soviet identity has always been more popular and stronger than an ethnic Belarussian identity. As a consequence, Belarus experienced no dissident movement during the existence of the USSR whereas Ukraine's opposition was the largest proportionately of all Soviet republics in relation to the size of its population. These notable differences remained after the USSR disintegrated. President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's Soviet Belarusian nationalism has been more popular than ethnic nationalism and patriotism within opposition groups. In Ukraine, a Soviet identity was only popular in the Donbas and the Crimea where it has nourished pro-Russian separatism. Viktor Yanukovych's election fraud and attempts to capture the Ukrainian state in 2004 and 2013 respectively provoked popular uprisings known as the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity (Euromaidan).

Religion has also differentiated Russian and (Yugoslavian) Serbian nationalism. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which is central to Russian national identity and unionist nationalism, was and continues to be a Church that claims canonical territory throughout the former USSR, particularly over the three eastern Slavic peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The Serbian Orthodox Church is only restricted to Serbs and not to the entire Yugoslavia or its Orthodox republics. Ukraine, a country with a population three times smaller than Russia, has a similar number of Orthodox parishes and therefore the ROC's canonical authority over Ukraine is central to maintaining its influence in the Orthodox world. The threat of Ukrainian Orthodox autocephaly is viewed as cataclysmic in Moscow.

Consequences of Intermingled National Identities

The intermingling of Soviet and Russian identities had three consequences. The first was that the Russian SFSR did not declare independence from the USSR in August 1991 after the failed coup d'état by communist hardliners and the consecutive dissolution of the union. Instead, it had already declared sovereignty in June 1990 and annually celebrates its "independence day" (Russia Day) on this anniversary.

Ukraine declared sovereignty and independence in July 1990 and August 1991 respectively and celebrates its Independence Day on 24 August.

Second, Russia found it difficult to take the Ataturk path of distancing itself from the Soviet Empire and to build a civic nation-state. During the 1990s under President Yeltsin there was weak support for civic nation building in post-Soviet Russia. Unlike the leaders of Ukraine and the three Baltic states, Yeltsin never wholeheartedly bolstered a quadruple transition of nation building, state creation, democratisation and marketisation. Instead, he adopted contradictory policies backing Russian nation building *and* the continuation of a surrogate USSR through close political, economic and security integration of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In the 1996 presidential elections when Yeltsin faced Communist Party leader Gennadiy Zyuganov he supported a new union state of Russia and Belarus. In the 1999 Ukrainian presidential elections, Leonid Kuchma also faced Communist Party leader Petro Symonenko but he won by appealing to Ukrainian anti-communist patriotism and positioned himself as the defender of Ukrainian state independence.

The third is that Russian great power nationalism in the last three decades of the USSR under Soviet leaders Leonid Brezhnev and Yuri Andropov as well as under Putin since 2000 has produced a cult of Stalin who is praised for building a nuclear superpower that was feared by the West. A Stalin cult mythologises the Great Patriotic War, thereby ignoring the 1939-1941 Nazi-Soviet alliance, and downplays his massive crimes against humanity. Ukraine's three-decade long de-Stalinisation is closely tied to its post-Soviet national identity and statehood.

Approaches of Russian National Identity

Since the 1990s, Russians have debated the contours of their national identity which can be divided into five approaches:

1. A *union identity* where Russians are defined as an imperial people or through their mission to establish a supranational state. Originally propounded by Soviet nationalists in the Communist Parties of Russia and Ukraine it has become popular as *Eurasianism* during Putin's presidency which draws upon extreme right-wing ideologies in Europe and integrates Russian nationalism and bolshevism. Its most well known proponent is Alyaksandr Dugin.
2. The *Russian nation incorporating all three eastern Slavic peoples* who are united by their common origins and culture. Putin and Russian leaders believe that Russians and Ukrainians are "odyn narod" (one people) which necessitates they live in one union or within a common cultural space such as that defined by the "Russkii Mir" (Russian World). This important factor has been ignored in the majority of the Western biographies of Putin and studies of the Russia-Ukraine crisis. In the last decade, White Russian émigré writers as well as military and political leaders have become very popular in Russia and have deepened the Russian chauvinistic view of Ukrainians as not a separate nation but the "Little Russian" branch of the Russian people. Ivan Ilyin, a prominent White Russian émigré writer and fascist sympathiser is Putin's favourite author. Imperialist and monarchist Igor Girkin, a Russian intelligence officer who led special forces in the takeover of eastern Ukrainian towns in spring 2014, believes that Ukrainians are not a separate people and their language is a dialect of Russian.
3. The *Russian nation as a community of Russian speakers* regardless of their ethnicity where language is the main marker of identity. At the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Putin told the NATO-Russian council that Ukraine was an artificial state and that "seventeen million Russians" lived in eastern and southern Ukraine. What he was referring to were Russian speakers who are described as "compatriots" and misunderstood as "Russians." This Russian myth failed the test of reality in the 2014-2015 crisis when Russian leaders were taken aback by Ukraine's staunch defence of its territorial integrity and the defeat of Putin's territorial objectives to carve out a "New Russia" in eastern and southern Ukraine. Russian leaders find it impossible to come to grips with the concept of a Russian-speaking Ukrainian patriot. Two thirds of the Ukrainian soldiers and National

Guard in the ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation – Ukraine's official name for the Donbas conflict) are Russian speakers and the war is largely one between Russian speakers, one pro-Ukrainian and the other pro-Soviet/Russian, on both sides of the frontline.

4. The *Russian nation defined racially* which is only found on the fringes of the extreme right and is unpopular. In the late Tsarist and late Soviet periods, it was represented by the anti-Semitic Black Hundreds and the orthodox "Pamyat" (Memory Society, preserver of Russian culture) movement respectively.

5. A *civic Russian national identity grounded in the Russian Federation*. Although Russkii and Rossiyski are both are translated as "Russian" they are different; Rossiysky civic identity is the closest analogy to British while Russkii is closest to English. A civic Russian identity only emerged within intellectual circles in the 1990s and never established deep roots for the reasons outlined earlier.

Nationalism has gained centre stage in Russia under Putin's rule who has integrated the first three approaches in his policies In particular, Eurasianism a former marginal nationalist programme has become the ruling ideology of today's Russia. It emerged in the 1930s among White Russian émigrés who dropped their anti-communism after coming to support Stalin's National Bolshevism. Eurasianism then and today is a substitute for de-colonisation because it mythologises Russia as having been more successful than Western Europe in managing ethnic diversity. Eurasianism treats Russia not as a colonial power but as a community of peoples who are themselves threatened by Western colonisation (as in the 1990s). A mythology of a successful union of diverse Eurasian peoples provides a rationale for building a Eurasian union rather than a civic nation-state.

Eurasianism is imbued with anti-Western xenophobia by claiming "Russian values" are superior to European values which have been degraded by political correctness, same sex marriage, decline in religious beliefs, and the undermining of nation-state sovereignty by the EU. Russia's allies for such views are anti-EU extreme right nationalist-populists some of whom, such as France's Front National, receive "loans" from Russia.[1] Eurasianism embraces the Mongol-Tatar Eurasian heritage and through the work of such ideologists as Dugin provides a new post-Soviet world outlook and identity for Russia's "siloviki" (security forces). Russia's siloviki, particularly the intelligence services, were always closely involved in the co-opting of Russian nationalism. In the late 1980s they facilitated the emergence of Pamyat and in 1991 assisted in the birth of the official nationalist Liberal Democratic Party led by Leonid Zhirinovsky.

Moreover, Putin's early "managed democracy" transformed into "managed nationalism." Russian nationalists refusing to be co-opted were banned (Movement Against Illegal Immigration), those that agreed received funding (Russian Image and its terrorist branch BORN which emerged from skinheads) while others were created as election projects (Rodina) to take votes from the Communist Party. Russian National Unity (RNE), Russia's first neo-Nazi political party, is tolerated. These and other nationalist, Cossack, monarchist, and Orthodox zealot groups have been permitted by the Russian authorities to recruit, train, and enter the Donbas to fight as volunteers alongside Donbas separatists.

Contemporary Russian identity has arrived at its apogee. Russia's unionist identity has a popular base of support within the ruling elites and population. Putin's Eurasian Economic Union built on conservative "traditional" values is defined as an alternative to a liberal EU that has departed from its Christian heritage and is undermining the traditional nation-state. The core of Putin's Eurasian union is a permanent union of three eastern Slavic peoples and a community of Russian speaking "compatriots". The core of the former USSR was similarly the Russian people, language, and culture grounded in the three eastern Slavs. Ukraine is understood as an artificial entity and a "failed state." It's Russian speaking eastern and southern regions need protecting from "fascist" nationalists who came to power on the back of the Euromaidan "putsch" that was orchestrated by the EU playing fiddle to the US. In the USSR, Ukrainian nationalists and dissidents were similarly attacked as "bourgeois nationalists" and "Nazi collaborators" who were in the pay of

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[1] http://www.politico.eu/article/le-pen-russia-crimea-putin-money-bank-national-front-seeks-russian-cash-for-election-fight/.

Western secret services. Ukrainians seeking independence from the USSR and today a European future outside the "Russian World" were denounced then and now as "traitors" to the eastern Slavic Russian world who were working on behalf of foreign powers.

With only the unpopular and marginal Yabloko opposed, Russian nationalists and democrats are united in their support for Russia's annexation of the Crimea. Russian democrats are though opposed to Putin's invasion and hybrid war in eastern Ukraine. Unfortunately, they are unlikely to come to power in the near future. Contemporary Eurasianist, eastern Slavic Russkii, and Russian speaking identities will therefore provide the world outlook for Russian leaders, their relationship with the West, and an image of Russia as a great power and unique civilisation for the foreseeable future.

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