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The War's Influence on Russian Identity

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The War's Influence on Russian Identity

For over a thousand days, Russia has been waging a full-scale war against Ukraine.

„This period has brought immense casualties, widespread destruction, and profound suffering.

It has also forced Russian citizens to repeatedly confront the questions:

Who are we? And what is our responsibility for this so-called "special military operation," now entering its third year?

Public discourse has addressed guilt[1], responsibility[2], strategies of behavior,[3] arguments for and against the war[4], about the new wave of Russian emigration.[5] In one way or another, most of these texts and speeches have touched on an important topic – national identity – but, with few exceptions, they have not been fully devoted to it.

"This text examines the Russian nation and national identity in the context of the war, structured in three parts: the first part explores the basic concepts of nation and nationalism; the second part revisits measures taken by post-Soviet Russia to construct a national identity; and the third part, based on interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024, analyses how belonging to the Russian state is conceptualized on an everyday level."

1 https://meduza.io/feature/2022/03/18/rossiyane-vinovny-v-voyne-protiv-ukrainy-ili-otvetstvenny-no-ne-vinovny

2 https://holod.media/2022/03/16/krasil/

3 https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2024/04/29/uekhat-nelzia-ostatsia

4 https://publicsociologylab.com/reports/far-war.html

5 https://outrush.io/report_january_2024

Chapter One.
Defining Nation and Identity

There is no consensus regarding the definition of the nation. Some scholars view the nation as a politicised ethno-cultural community, a group sharing common ancestry and culture, which have been politically formalized ina nation-state.[6] Another approach views the nation as both a cultural community, united by shared high culture, and a political entity, tied to an existing or aspirational state.[7]

The second approach sees national identity as a product of nationalism, which takes two forms: state-governed nationalism (official) and nationalism seeking statehood (oppositional). Official nationalism, driven by political elites, relies on patriotism as a "civic religion," fostering loyalty and even a willingness to die for the nation. As B. Anderson noted, cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers embody this modern culture of nationalism.[8]

Official nationalism focuses on ensuring cultural homogeneity and making the nation the primary object of identification[9]. This is achieved through mass education, symbolic politics, historical narratives, and propaganda. National identity is reinforced by public symbols, rituals, and a calendar of celebrations. Citizenship also plays a key role, linking individuals to the state by granting political rights in exchange for duties, fostering a sense of belonging rooted in mutual obligations rather than rituals alone.In this case, the sense of belonging to the nation is not so much a consequence of rituals and/or propaganda, but rather of the individual's awareness of his or her duties created in exchange for political rights.

Oppositional nationalism arises as a response to official nationalism, with groups resisting unification and asserting their right to political independence. It often manifests through national movements that construct a "personalized image of the nation," invoking a shared memory of a "glorious past" and collective defeats, which are "resented as failures that still touch them.""[10] Its methods vary, including uniting territories (irredentism), separating from a larger state (secession), or establishing a new state. The mechanisms of oppositional nationalism vary: uniting disparate territories into a single state (irredentism), separating a region from a larger state (secession), or (re)creating a state.

National identity is essentially the product of identity politics—efforts by political actors and state institutions to shape the nation's image and foster a sense of belonging. A key aspect of this is the "we" community, the nation's collective self-portrait, which defines its values, unites its past, present, and future, and establishes the criteria for belonging. At the same time, nation and national identity are not solely products of political and cultural elites. As studies of everyday nationhood show,[11] Studies on everyday nationhood reveal that nations are shaped and sustained by the daily practices of ordinary people, who reproduce, reinterpret, or even reject public rituals and narratives. This is reflected in actions such as participation (or non-participation) in national holidays, the use (or avoidance) of official symbols, and the support or critique of official historical narratives.

6 https://files.znu.edu.ua/files/Bibliobooks/Inshi46/0037785.pdf

7 https://eupress.ru/books/index/item/id/81

8 https://www.hse.ru/data/2016/10/23/1110949768/%D0%90%D0%BD%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%BD.%D0%BA%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B3%D0%B0.pdf

9 https://biblio.school/pub/usloviya-svobody/

10 https://pawet.net/library/history/bel_history/_articles/hro/%D1%85%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%85_%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B2._%D0%BE%D1%82_%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D1%8B%D1%85_%D0%B4%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B9_%D0%BA_%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D1%8C%D1%8E_%D1%81%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%B2%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%B9%D1%81%D1%8F_%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8.html

11 https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/23078/ssoar-ethnicities-2008-4-fox_et_al-everyday_nationhood.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Chapter Two. Inventing the Russian Nation

By the time of the collapse of the USSR, Russia lacked a positive experience of nation-building. Neither the Russian Empire nor the RSFSR functioned as a nation-state, despite efforts in both eras to build a national community. Moreover, the unique system of ethnic federalism established by the Bolsheviks left a complex legacy that Russia has not fully processed to this day.

The Soviet Union was founded on the idea of citizens as a priori bearers of a specific ethnicity (nationality), which, from the 1930s onward, was recorded and stated in identification documents. At the same time, representatives of the so-called "titular nations"[12] had certain preferences over those citizens who either did not have "their" territorial entities (i. e. union and autonomous republics, autonomous regions and districts) or lived outside "their" territory. Yuri Slezkine[13] compared the USSR to a shared flat where each Soviet republic represented a separate room furnished according to the traditions of its respective "titular" nationality. At the same time, one of the republics – the RSFSR – included the common areas (the hall, corridor and kitchen), rather than having its own, "national" space.

"My address is not a house or a street, my address is the Soviet Union". Album cover

The legacy of the Soviet system had several significant consequences. First, in almost all post-Soviet countries, a biological perception of the nation became dominant. In other words, the nation was viewed as the successor to the "titular nationality" (a blood-based community) rather than as a community of fellow citizens united by a common state. Second, due to the specific nature of the "shared flat," many ethnic Russians regarded the entire Soviet Union as "theirs." The song "My address is not a house or a street, my address is the Soviet Union", popular in the late USSR, primarily reflected the perspective of this segment of the population. Consequently, compared to the other 14 Soviet republics, the RSFSR was least prepared to form a nation-state within its own borders.

This legacy shaped the challenges of post-Soviet nation-building in Russia, it went through several stages and was closely tied to the goals of the political elites of the time. In particular, Boris Yeltsin faced the challenges of territorial disintegration and a conflict with his parliament. In his very first address to the Federation Council, he emphasized the necessity of state consolidation[14]. Plans were made to develop a unified nation based on the common citizenship of its members. During this period, the term Rossiyane entered political discourse to describe members of the new political community—citizens of the Rossijskaya Federatsiya (Russian Federation). Unlike Russkie, which refers exclusively to ethnic Russians, Rossiyane was meant to reflect a broader, multi-ethnic identity tied to the civic framework of the Russian state. However, this term struggled to gain substantive meaning, as the state failed to articulate a clear vision of this inclusive identity or the nation's future direction. Attempts to formulate such responses were made during the 1996 presidential campaign. In response to the initiative of CPRF leader Gennady Zyuganov to return to Soviet ideals under new conditions, Yeltsin created a special group of advisors whose tasked with developing a national idea. At the same time, a contest titled "Idea for Russia"[15] was announced in the Rossiyskaya Gazeta newspaper, inviting

12 The "titular" nationality in the USSR was a nation which name was used in a territory title, for example, Latvians in the Latvian SSR, Tatars in the Tatar ASSR, etc.

13 Slezkine, Y. (2001) The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism [Слезкин Ю. СССР как коммунальная квартира, или Каким образом социалистическое государство поощряло этническую обособленность //Американская русистика: Вехи историографии последних лет. Советский период: Антология. Самара: Самарский государственный университет, 329–374].

14 https://yeltsin.ru/archive/paperwork/12590/

15 http://www.yeltsinmedia.com/events/july-30-1996/

everyone to submit their proposals. However, by the late 1990s, all efforts to form a unified nation had been abandoned. The authorities failed to formulate either a vision for the future or a basis for the solidarity of Russian citizens.

Upon coming to power, Vladimir Putin declared: “There is no need to specifically search for a national idea. It is already maturing in our society ... the only ... real choice for Russia may be the choice of a strong country”.[16] At the end of 2000, laws on state symbols were adopted, combining the pre-revolutionary coat of arms and flag and the melody of the Soviet anthem. As V. Putin emphasized in his address to the deputies: “Not only can we, but we must use today all the main symbols of our state”[17] with its centuries-long, uninterrupted history. Later, these ideas were reflected in the establishment of the People’s Unity Day[18] and in the concept of Russia’s thousand-year history.[19] In other words, the past was used as a basis for the consolidation of Russian society, and the answer to the question “Who are we?” became: we are the descendants of our great ancestors. The main event of the past around which the main unifying narratives and practices were built was the Great Patriotic War, which serves as a kind of “founding myth”[20] of the Russian state.

A new phase of identity politics was launched in 2012, as Vladimir Putin proclaimed the idea of Russia as a unique multinational state-civilization with Russian culture in its core.[21] Initially, this concept did not include the creation of an ethnic Russian state, contrary to the demands of Russian nationalists, who argued that the main idea of the new Russia should be fighting against the “dominance of migrants”. These nationalists redefined the Day of National Unity as a “day of people’s anger” and an occasion for “Russian marches”.[22] However, the state was forced to respond to the growing popularity of nationalist ideas. As early as 2009, the pro-Kremlin movement “Nashi” attempted to organize its own “Russian march”, emphasizing that “everyone who has a Russian passport is a Russian”.[23] In 2014, the annexation of Crimea allowed the Russian authorities to adopt an even more nationalist stance than the nationalist movements themselves. The ideas of the “Russian world” and historical justice became key elements of the official narrative for years to come. Nation-building efforts remained rooted in the past, but their echoes were reflected in contemporary political decisions. Public opinion polls showed that this strategy was quite successful, and the so-called “Crimean Consensus”[24] ensured the consolidation of Russian society for the next several years.[25]

Everything changed dramatically on February 24, 2022, when Vladimir Putin announced the so-called “special military operation”. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a challenge for both the regime and society. The regime responded by intensifying repression[26] and large-scale ideological indoctrination of schoolchildren[27] and students.[28] Meanwhile, citizens adopted various strategies to (re)define their connection to the Russian state.

16 http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21480

17 https://www.1tv.ru/news/2000-12-05/284163-vladimir_putin_obratilsya_k_deputatam_gosdumy_s_zayavleniem_o_gosudarstvennoy_simvolike

18 In his landmark article from 2012, Vladimir Putin proposed November 4 as the “birthday of our civic nation.” - https://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html

19 http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931

20 https://meduza.io/feature/2017/05/09/kak-den-pobedy-stal-glavnym-prazdnikom-strany-video-meduzy

21 https://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html

22 https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/den-narodnogo-edinstva-izobretenie-prazdnika

23 https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1250286

24 https://www.levada.ru/2021/04/26/krym/.

25 https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/128581244/Affect_and_Autocracy_Emotions_GREENE_Acc10May_GREEN_AAM.pdf

26 https://data.ovd.info/svodka-antivoennykh-repressiy-dva-goda-polnomasshtabnogo-vtorzheniya-rossii-v-ukrainu

27 https://razgovor.edsoo.ru/

28 https://minobrnauki.gov.ru/press-center/news/novosti-ministerstva/72464/

Chapter Three.
Being a Russian Citizen During Wartime

Between the end of 2022 and the summer of 2024, a team of independent researchers conducted approximately one hundred interviews with Russian citizens who stayed or left the country. We spoke with people of various ages (the youngest participant was 18, and the oldest was 72), professions (ranging from unemployed and former prisoner to PhD and top manager of a large company), and regions (from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok, and from Arkhangelsk to Rostov-on-Don). Our informants had diverse perspectives on the war: about one fifth expressed a clearly pro-war position, some found it difficult to articulate their views, and the overwhelming majority were against the war. But for each of them, the war was a significant event that made them (re)consider who they were and their relationship with the Russian state.

We found four main strategies of self-identification. For some informants, the big war strengthened their sense of belonging to the state and had an effect comparable to the "rally around the flag" phenomenon after the annexation of Crimea. This reinforcement was associated with the sense of pride in a strong state:

> *"there appeared a little bit of pride and a feeling that... well, how many times can you wipe your feet on us? How many times can be proved that you are a poor creature... when the state shows its fists, it is still very good, no matter how painful and hard it is"*
>
> *(w, 46, Voronezh).*

This strategy is typically common among pro-war respondents whose close social circle includes (or included) individuals working in security, defence and law enforcement agencies. For them, being part of Russia now is pleasant. However, the feeling of belonging to the Russian state does not evoke positive emotions for everyone. For some, the intensification of national identity is connected with the feelings of guilt and responsibility for the war:

> *"I would like not to feel connected to Russia. It would be very convenient ... because then one could be ...not responsible for what is being done in my name right now ... But it is impossible. I still feel I am a citizen with certain responsibility"*
>
> *(w, 21, Yekaterinburg).*

Another strategy – national agnosticism – involves a refusal to define oneself in national terms and instead choosing a narrower identity. In situations where belonging to the state evokes unpleasant feelings, a person may choose a more comfortable community of belonging, typically based on their region of residence or ethnic group:

> *"my home is the Republic of Karelia, because my family lives there. The next level, which is the country and everything that this country has been doing for the last year, has become something so alien to me that I do not relate myself to this"*
>
> *(w, 24, Karelia/Kaliningrad-Montenegro);*

> *"I may not realize the full importance of the question or even the words, Russians this and that, no, but at the moment I am a Chuvash"*
>
> *(w, 27, Tyumen).*

There is also an opposite strategy – the expansion of the space of belonging. It also implies refusal to define oneself through citizenship, but, unlike the previous strategy, it aims to expand rather than narrow the community. Our respondents often emphasized the importance of belonging to Russian culture and, more broadly, to the Russian-speaking community:

> *"I write songs in Russian, I think in Russian, and this connection to the language is probably the most... the strongest. That's where I definitely belong, to Russian-speakers, and it's hard for me to lose it"*
>
> *(w, 33, Moscow).*

At the same time, belonging to Russian culture is contrasted with the official narrative of the "Russian world". For our informants, the cultural community has no attachment to state institutions and borders. Therefore, attempts by the state to monopolize the right to culture are perceived extremely negatively.

Finally, some of our informants adopted a new identity and became part of a different political community. This is a relatively rare strategy, as obtaining another citizenship in a relatively short period of time is feasible for only for a limited number of people. But those who have made such a choice often explicitly declared their rejection of any connection with Russia:

> *“this is a territory that is no longer called Motherland. It is now called the country of exodus <...> my fellow citizens are Israelis. It’s not Russians, not anymore”*
>
> *(m, 47, SPb-Israel).*

In other cases, the “new” identity was not related to leaving Russia, but instead became a way to cope with the guilt and discomfort of belonging to the Russian state:

> *“To be honest, I felt Russian before the war started. And then I thought: maybe it would be better for me to be just a Jew, and it would save me from all these torments: ah, we Russians are to blame for everything, ah, we Russians are so terrible. So I quickly changed my mind like this, and here we go, I’m not Russian at all”*
>
> *(w, 48, Moscow).*

***

Being a citizen of Russia in 2024 is a challenging task. On the one hand, the Russian state aims to consolidate society in the face of “external threats” by promoting the idea of Russia as a unique civilization. On the other hand, it seeks to exclude citizens from any unauthorized political participation. Russian citizens are expected to accept the current situation as a given. At the same time, in everyday life, belonging to the state is being problematized and redefined in various ways, from strengthening national identity to a complete rejection of it. The issue of nation-building in Russia remains unresolved. It is obvious that politicians seeking power in post-Putin Russia should already be reflecting on the positive foundations of solidarity within Russian society.

About the author

The author of this publication remains anonymous due to the Russian government‘s punitive measures against dissidents and the associated security risks. However, their identity is known to the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Russia Programme. As a trusted expert with a proven track record of analysis in their field, they continue to contribute valuable insights despite the risks they face

The War's Influence on Russian Identity

For over a thousand days, Russia has been waging a full-scale war against Ukraine. This period has resulted in immense casualties, widespread destruction, and profound suffering. At the same time, it has forced Russian citizens to confront fundamental questions: Who are we? What is our responsibility for this war, officially referred to as a "special military operation"?

Public discourse has touched upon issues of guilt, responsibility, individual strategies of behavior, arguments for and against the war, and the new wave of Russian emigration. While many discussions have referenced national identity, few have fully explored it as a central theme.

This publication examines Russian national identity in the context of the war. It is structured into three parts: the first outlines the fundamental concepts of nation and nationalism; the second analyzes the measures taken by post-Soviet Russia to construct a national identity; and the third, based on interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024, explores how Russian citizens conceptualize their belonging to the state in everyday life.

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