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Succession and Empire:

How Imperial Continuity Undermines the Formation of a National Identity in Russia



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1. Executive summary

This paper examines how imperial continuity has obstructed the development of a coherent post-Soviet national identity in Russia. Historically, “Russia” and “Russian Empire” were used interchangeably, and after 1917, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) inherited imperial space without articulating a distinct national character. Throughout the Soviet era, the RSFSR served as the political core of the USSR, yet lacked a distinct voice of its own.

Following the USSR’s collapse in 1991, the Russian Federation emerged as a sovereign state, adopting a new constitution in 1993. However, this transition lacked a symbolic or ideological rupture with the past. No foundational break or civic redefinition occurred; instead, imperial and Soviet symbols, narratives, and sentiments persisted. Russia came to view itself less as a new republic than as a “truncated empire,” incomplete within its *de jure* 1991 borders.

This unresolved identity crisis shaped both domestic politics and foreign policy, contributing to the revival of expansionist discourse and actions – most notably the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The idea of “historical Russia” filled the void left by the absence of a forward-looking national vision.

2. Russia as empire: the equivalence of terms before 1917

Before 1917, the terms “Russia” and “Russian Empire” were used interchangeably in both legal and political discourse. This terminological equivalence reflected the conception of the Russian polity as an imperial entity that encompassed a vast array of territories and peoples beyond the ethnic Russian core. The 1906 Fundamental Laws¹ of the Russian Empire serve as a clear example of this interchangeable usage, as the terms “Russian State” (*Gosudarstvo Rossiiskoe*), “Russia,” and “Russian Empire” are used therein as synonyms. The notion of “Russia” included, without distinction, Poland, the Grand Duchy of Finland, the Caucasus, Siberia, and Central Asia. In legal and offi-

cial usage, there was no meaningful separation between the geographic Russia (*Velikorossiya*) and the politico-legal entity of the Russian Empire.

Following the abdication of Nicholas II during the February Revolution of 1917, the Provisional Government maintained this continuity. It was only on 1 September 1917, that Prime Minister Alexander Kerensky proclaimed² Russia a republic, marking a terminological shift from “Empire” to “Republic.” However, even at this point, the “Russian Republic” still referred to a territory that included many parts of the Empire-like Ukraine, Belarus, the Caucasus – some of which were already under German-Austrian occupation due to World War I.

The Bolsheviks, upon seizing power in October 1917, continued to act on behalf of the entire “Russian Republic,” not merely the ethnic Russian core. As Joseph Stalin observed in his 1919 article “The Government’s Policy on the National Question,”³ the October Revolution accelerated the fragmentation of the imperial territory. People began to speak not of “Russia” as a whole, but of “Great Russia” (*Velikorossiya*) – an implicit admission that the meaning of “Russia” had begun to shrink under the pressures of revolution and war.

Nevertheless, at the time of the 1918 Constitution of the RSFSR, the borders of the newly declared Russian Soviet Republic remained unclear. Though the Bolsheviks had recognized the independence of Finland and Ukraine, and had ceded the Baltics and parts of the Caucasus in the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, they still imagined the RSFSR as a successor to the broader imperial space. This RSFSR was not a nation-state for ethnic Russians. Rather, it was the institutional remnant of the Russian Empire, reconfigured as a federation without clear ethnic or territorial boundaries. It was composed of those regions that had not successfully broken away and had not yet been reconsolidated into the emerging Soviet Union. In essence, “Russia” became everything that had not escaped the empire – an administrative entity rather than a consciously defined nation-state.

¹ Fundamental Laws of the Russian Empire (1906). Available at: <https://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/apr1906.htm> (Accessed: 9 June 2025). (in Russian)

² Decree on the Proclamation of Russia as a Republic (1917). Available at: <https://constitution.garant.ru/history/act1600-1918/5203/> (Accessed: 9 June 2025). (in Russian)

³ Stalin, J.V. (1919) The Government’s Policy on the National Question, 31 January. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1919/01/31c.htm> (Accessed: 9 June 2025).

3. The RSFSR: remainder of empire, denied subjectivity

The creation of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in 1917–1918 marked the transformation of the imperial core into a new federal entity – but not a national one. Unlike the other emerging republics on the ruins of the empire, the RSFSR did not claim or develop a distinct national identity. It was not conceived as a state for ethnic Russians, nor did it function as one. Rather, it inherited the remnants of the empire that had not managed or been allowed to break away.

The 1918 Constitution of the RSFSR failed to define the republic's borders or its ethnic or civic character. While Ukraine, Finland, the Baltics, and parts of the Caucasus broke out of the imperial space, the RSFSR was left with what remained – territories not yet lost or not yet organized into separate republics. In this way, Russia after the revolution was not a clearly delimited national entity but rather a residual structure, retaining vast lands and peoples without the framework of a national state.

Importantly, the Soviet leadership never intended for the RSFSR to become a Russian national republic. The official narrative emphasized internationalism and federalism, portraying the RSFSR as a neutral administrative shell rather than a vehicle of Russian sovereignty. This lack of national self-definition was reinforced and institutionalized during the decades of Soviet rule. The RSFSR had no Communist Party of its own until 1990, no independent cultural or academic institutions, and no representation in foreign affairs. It was the only union republic not allowed to articulate itself as a national entity. As historian Terry Martin observed, Russians were the “awkward nationality”⁴ – simultaneously central and denied institutional distinctiveness.

The logic behind this design was political. Soviet leadership feared that a nationally conscious RSFSR could dominate the other republics and threaten the balance of the multinational Union. The suppression of Russian political subjectivity was thus a core feature of the Soviet system, not an oversight. This became particularly clear during the Leningrad Affair (1949–50), when RSFSR officials proposed a new flag and discussed creating a Russian bureau within the Communist Party. These suggestions were interpreted as veiled nationalism and met with severe repression. The arrests and executions of the RSFSR officials sent a clear message: any assertion of Russian identity outside the Soviet framework would be crushed.

Consequently, the RSFSR functioned as the administrative and economic engine of the USSR, but lacked any political tools for self-representation. It hosted Union institutions,

funded the Soviet state, and contributed to its resources, yet had no means of articulating its own interests. This institutional silence persisted until perestroika, when reform and crisis reopened the question of Russian political identity. By the late 1980s, a new wave of Russian intellectuals and politicians began to describe the RSFSR's position as one of internal colonization. Proposals for a separate Russian Communist Party, and complaints about economic exploitation by the Union centre, became increasingly vocal. In this late-Soviet moment, the RSFSR began to re-emerge as a political subject, not through a project of national construction, but as a reaction to decades of suppression and invisibility.

4. 1990–1991: sovereignty, borders, and the rediscovery of Russia

The political awakening of the RSFSR in 1990–1991 marked a dramatic shift: from a suppressed administrative entity within the USSR to a republic asserting its sovereignty. Yet this newfound assertiveness immediately revealed a deeper unresolved problem – what, exactly, was Russia? What were its borders, its historical foundations, and its relationship to the imperial and Soviet past?

The Declaration of State Sovereignty of the RSFSR, adopted on June 12, 1990, was a milestone in reasserting republican authority. The document spoke of the “peoples historically united” in Russia and referred vaguely to a “statehood of Russia with its centuries-old history.” However, unlike the independence declarations of the Baltic or Caucasian republics, it made no reference to pre-Soviet democratic or imperial traditions. The RSFSR's claim to sovereignty rested on present dissatisfaction, not a clear historical model.

This conceptual vagueness was matched by legal and territorial ambiguity. As the Soviet Union disintegrated, the RSFSR – soon to become the Russian Federation – had no clearly defined, internationally recognized borders. Its internal administrative borders were about to become state frontiers, a process accepted in practice but rarely acknowledged as final or legitimate by political elites.

The ambiguity was underscored in August 1991, when Pavel Voshchanov, press secretary to President Yeltsin, publicly stated⁵ that the RSFSR reserved the right to revise its borders with former union republics, excluding only the Baltic states. Although Yeltsin later distanced himself from the statement, Voshchanov remained in his post, and the idea of “historical Russia” continued to linger in political rhetoric.

This hesitation to accept the post-1991 borders as permanent reflected a deeper identity crisis. Many political figures – across the spectrum – saw the RSFSR not as the full

⁴ Martin, T. (1998) 'The Russification of the RSFSR', *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 39 (1–2), pp. 99–117. Available at: https://www.persee.fr/doc/cmr_1252-6576_1998_num_39_1_2515 (Accessed: 9 June 2025).

⁵ Voščanov, Pavel I.: *Elĭcin kak navaždenie*. Zapiski političeskogo prochodimca, Moskva 2019. S.189.

expression of Russia, but as a temporary fragment.⁶ The widespread nostalgia for the imperial and Soviet pasts made it difficult to construct a new vision of Russia as a distinct, bounded, and self-sufficient nation-state. Symbolic politics mirrored this uncertainty. The tricolour flag, initially adopted informally by the democratic opposition in the late 1980s, began appearing in official events. Yet the state continued using Soviet emblems. The RSFSR had no new constitution; it operated under the heavily amended 1978 Soviet Constitution, which still defined power through the system of Soviets.

Even as Boris Yeltsin was elected President of the RSFSR in June 1991 and inaugurated in July, the symbolism of the event reflected hesitation rather than a break. His inaugural address⁷ avoided specific mention of the imperial or Soviet past, emphasizing instead a vague idea of historical continuity and democratic novelty – “for the first time in a thousand years,” he said, “a Russian President takes an oath before the people.”

This liminal status of the RSFSR in 1990–1991 – neither a fully new state nor a clear continuation – made the founding moment of the Russian Federation ambiguous. Unlike post-colonial or post-communist neighbours that framed their independence as a clean break, Russia refrained from defining itself in contrast to its past. The very name of the state, “Russian Federation,” retained the structure of Soviet terminology; no Constituent Assembly was convened to legitimize a new constitutional order; and no political consensus emerged about the meaning of 1991.

In effect, Russia’s emergence as a sovereign state was procedural but not symbolic. It inherited the institutions, borders, and infrastructure of the RSFSR, but not a new self-understanding. The absence of a clearly articulated civic identity made it easy for elites and society alike to retreat into imperial and Soviet imagery, a pattern that would define post-Soviet Russia’s ambivalence about its own statehood.

5. 1991–1993: a new name without a new foundation

On December 25, 1991, the RSFSR was officially renamed as the Russian Federation, and by the end of that day, Mikhail Gorbachev had resigned and the Soviet Union had ceased to exist. Yet, despite this momentous shift, the 1978 Constitution of the RSFSR – a document born under Soviet rule – remained in force. It was amended numerous times in 1990 and 1991 to accommodate a presidential system and evolving federal structure, but its foundations remained Soviet in both form and spirit.

⁶ Zubok, V.M. (2022) *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 173.

⁷ Yeltsin, B.N. (1991) Text of the Address Following the Presidential Oath, 10 July 1991. Available at: <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/paperwork/9678/> (Accessed: 9 June 2025). (in Russian)

Unlike the Baltic republics or Eastern European states, which anchored their post-communist identity in pre-Soviet constitutional traditions or convened constituent assemblies, Russia did not declare a new republic or adopt a founding document. There was no redefinition of citizenship, no legal statement of rupture with the Soviet past, and no formal claim of historical continuity with the Russian Empire or the 1917 Provisional Government. In contrast to Latvia, which legally defined itself as restoration of interwar democracy, Russia remained a renamed structure without foundational rearticulation.

The absence of a constituent moment had major consequences. It created a situation where the legitimacy of the new Russian state rested on institutional inertia rather than political consensus or national self-definition. The fragmented constitutional structure allowed for contradictory political forces – like liberal reformers and former Soviet bureaucrats – to coexist within the same administrative framework, often paralyzing decision-making.

The parliamentary crisis of October 1993, in which President Yeltsin dissolved the Supreme Soviet by decree and then ordered the military to shell the parliament building, underscored the fragility of this inherited framework. In the aftermath of this crisis, Yeltsin pushed through a new 1993 Constitution via a controversial referendum. While it created a strong presidential system and outlined a formal division of powers, the new constitution did not include a preamble declaring the birth of a new state, nor did it frame Russia as a break from its imperial or Soviet predecessors. In fact, it retained many institutional and symbolic continuities, including the name “Russian Federation,” and omitted any reference to 1991 as a foundational date.

This lack of symbolic and legal re-foundation left the Russian state in an ambiguous position. It was not post-imperial in the way Poland or the Baltic states were; nor was it post-communist in the way that Ukraine or Georgia attempted to be. Russia’s path after 1991 was shaped by a legal continuity without ideological or national clarity – a situation that allowed both imperial nostalgia and Soviet revivalism to remain active currents in public discourse.

6. Between loss and legacy: Imperial continuity and the failure of Post-Soviet identity

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, the Russian state restored and reappropriated imperial and Soviet symbols in an effort to assert continuity and stability. The adoption of the tricolour flag and double-headed eagle evoked imperial heritage, while the reinstatement of the Soviet anthem’s melody under President Vladimir Putin in 2000 signalled a deliberate integration of Soviet legacy into post-Soviet statehood. This symbolic layering blurred the distinction between regime change and regime

survival, reinforcing a vision of the Russian state as the uninterrupted successor to a thousand-year historical trajectory.

The same logic applied to public commemorations. Victory Day (9 May), celebrating the Soviet victory in World War II, remained the central ritual of national pride, while June 12 – officially designated as “Russia Day” to mark the 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty – failed to attain cultural resonance. Few citizens associated it with a meaningful moment of democratic transformation or civic rebirth. The persistence of Soviet memory at the centre of national life reflected not only state policy but the absence of a competing narrative.

This symbolic orientation shaped public attitudes. Surveys conducted by public opinion research centres repeatedly confirmed that a majority of Russians viewed⁸ the collapse of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical tragedy rather than a moment of liberation. Putin’s 2005 declaration that the disintegration of the USSR was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century”⁹ gave this sentiment an official voice, validating a worldview in which post-Soviet Russia remained conceptually incomplete.

As a result, Russia in the 2000s became defined less by what it was than by what it had lost. The notion of the Russian Federation as a “truncated empire”¹⁰ took hold in elite discourse and popular imagination alike. The borders established in 1991 were treated not as the foundation of sovereign statehood but as temporary limits – lines to be transcended when history permitted. This sense of territorial and civilizational incompleteness underpinned both domestic ideology and foreign policy, contributing directly to the revival of expansionist narratives under the banners of “historical Russia” and the “Russian World.”

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent interventions in the post-Soviet space were not aberrations but expressions of this unresolved identity. Lacking a post-imperial civic vision, the Russian state turned to logic of reclamation: the idea that true sovereignty required reunification with territories understood to belong to Russia’s historical self. In this framework, state borders were subordinate to civilizational frontiers, and the present was always subject to correction by the past.

Domestically, the same logic shaped memory politics. Educational curricula emphasized the continuity and strength of the Soviet state, portraying it not as a totalitarian devia-

tion but as a source of legitimacy. Museums and textbooks promoted narratives of imperial grandeur and military triumph, marginalizing the democratic and constitutional experiments of the early 1990s. The state’s identity project centred on historical greatness, sacrifice, and unity – leaving little room for pluralism, individual rights, or strong democratic institutions.

This return to an imperial paradigm had profound consequences. Internally, it impeded the development of a civic national identity that could integrate Russia’s diverse population into a shared project of democratic citizenship. Externally, it positioned Russia as a revisionist power, fundamentally uneasy with the international order that emerged from the Soviet collapse. The idea that Russia remained “incomplete” until it had regained its rightful place became a core principle of political discourse.

What remained absent was a clear articulation of Russia as a modern republic: a state bound by law, grounded in civic equality, and oriented toward the future. Instead, identity became conditional – suspended between memory and ambition, stability and nostalgia. The state’s very success in maintaining symbolic and institutional continuity since 1991 became its burden, preventing the imaginative rupture necessary for national reinvention.

⁸ Filimonov, S. (2023) Nostalgia for the USSR: how Russians’ attitude to the collapse of the Soviet Union has changed. *Forbes Russia*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.ru/forbeslife/489363-nostal-gia-po-ssr-kak-menalos-otnosenie-rossian-k-raspadu-sovetskogo-souza> (Accessed: 16 June 2025).

⁹ NBC News (2005) ‘Putin: Soviet collapse a “genuine tragedy”’, NBC News, 25 April. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057> (Accessed: 9 June 2025).

¹⁰ Plokhy, S. (2017) *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation from 1470 to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, p. 348.

About the author

Alexey Uvarov is a political scientist and historian specializing in Russian memory politics and post-Soviet identity. He is a guest researcher at Ruhr University Bochum, supported within the framework of the Fedor Stepun Initiative. He has contributed to academic publications as well as independent media, among them Meduza and Dekoder.

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The article analyses how imperial continuity has hindered the formation of a coherent post-Soviet national identity in Russia. It argues that since 1917, Russia has failed to develop a distinct civic conception of statehood, inheriting instead the institutional and symbolic framework of its imperial and Soviet predecessors. The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) functioned as the administrative core of the USSR without national subjectivity or independent political representation. After 1991, the Russian Federation emerged as a formally sovereign state but without a symbolic rupture or constitutional re-foundation. This absence of a founding moment preserved imperial and Soviet narratives, leaving the new state suspended between continuity and transformation. The resulting identity vacuum was filled by nostalgia and expansionist discourse, most visibly in the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russia came to view itself not as a republic defined by law and citizenship, but as a “truncated empire” whose legitimacy derived from historical inheritance rather than civic consensus.

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