Nationalism for Export? The Domestic and Foreign Policy Implications of the new ‘Russian Idea’

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Introduction

Has Russia really ‘gone nationalist’, as one scholar foretold ten years ago (Allensworth 1998)? It is certainly an unquestioned assumption of much academic and journalistic coverage that contemporary Russia is beset by a rising tide of aggressive nationalism that affects its domestic and foreign politics. For example, attention focuses on aspects such as the marked increase in xenophobic and chauvinistic public sentiments (especially increased support for the slogan ‘Russia for the [ethnic] Russians’), the rise of racially-motivated violence on Russian city streets, the prominence of Russian nationalist thinkers and anti-Western sentiment in Russia’s domestic discourse. Increasingly, an ‘assertive’, perhaps ‘neo-imperial’ foreign policy appears inextricably linked with anti-foreign sentiment (for example against Georgians in 2006, Estonians in 2007) and increasingly challenges the Euro-Atlantic community (e.g. Smith 2005; Gomart 2006; Joo 2008; Varga 2008; Clover 2008).

So, is there any reason to challenge Edward Lucas’ view that the ‘ideological conflict of the New Cold War is between lawless Russian nationalism and law-governed Western multilateralism’ (Lucas 2008: 14)? Indeed, many analysts would also point to the doctrine of ‘Sovereign democracy’ promulgated by the Kremlin since 2005 as expressly designed to legitimate such a newly assertive proclamation of unique Russian values alongside attempts to discredit Western values and institutions (e.g. Popescu 2006). A subtext of such preoccupations is the Weimar Russia scenario; the idea that Putin has transformed Russia into ‘a harsh brand of authoritarianism with some fascist features’ (Hassner 2008: 7).

Nevertheless, the view of Russia as obviously nationalistic and proto-fascistic is contested, and not just by Kremlin spin doctors who now ritually rebut any Western criticism as cold-war Russophobia. For one thing, several analysts doubt whether the Russian elite even has a consistent ideology, nationalistic or otherwise (e.g. Trenin 2007a; Evans 2008). Second, some see the nationalism of the Russian elite as a relatively ‘liberal’ version: its accent is predominately on a civil and cultural nationalism that is probably the most moderate version currently possible given that contemporary Russian liberalism has apparently met a tragicomic demise (e.g. Prozorov 2005; Bacon 2006; Sakwa 2008b/c). Third, the Russian nationalist ‘threat’ has been used as a phantom by Russian and Western elites alike for self-serving reasons: the political and electoral record of all nationalists since Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s shock victory in the Duma elections of 1993 has actually been consistently very poor (Lieven 1999). In the circumstances, what is surprising is the weakness rather than the strength of Russian nationalism.

How can such diverse interpretations be bridged? A principal reason for the diversity is simply that many analysts look at discrete elements of Russian nationalism (e.g. xenophobic public sentiments, nationalist thinkers’ philosophy, and Kremlin pronouncements) but rarely explicitly investigate their interaction. This article aims to take a more holistic view that focuses on how state approaches to nationalism interact with public sentiments and affect Russia’s domestic and foreign policies. I will argue that the Russian authorities’ nationalism (which I call ‘official nationality’) is moderate in its content relative to historical and contemporary forms of Russian nationalism. This is because its aim is not the expression of nationalism per se but its control and utilisation for regime goals. However, the effect of official nationality is far less benign than its content because of contradictions inherent in its political utilisation: the regime takes a profoundly administrative approach that is far
less post-Soviet than the content of its nationalism, and its approach to extreme nationalism is ambiguous and inconsistent. On one hand, the Kremlin periodically and inconsistently co-opts and mobilises even extreme nationalism, on the other, it repeatedly suppresses nationalism when its political implications become destabilising. Such an approach prevents nationalism either of extreme or moderate orientation becoming an influential, independent force in Russian politics, for good or for ill. So to a large degree, the Russian elite is a prisoner of its own methods: although the new president Dmitrii Medvedev has made counteracting extreme nationalism ever more a priority, the Kremlin’s past record at creating nationalist demands that it then has to suppress indicates that such efforts are primed for failure.

The Kremlin’s official nationality has several implications. Although the Russian elite is often accused of neo-Soviet methods, official nationality is avowedly post-Soviet in content, even if the methods by which it is communicated are more traditional to Soviet or even Tsarist practice. Western concerns over an imminent ‘New Cold War’ prompted by value competition between an authoritarian, nationalist Russian ‘sovereign democracy’ and Western liberal democracy are a dramatic oversimplification: such a clash of civilisations is far from inevitable and even unlikely. Most ‘nationalist’ rhetoric appears to be primarily for domestic use. Moreover, the Russian elite is deeply schizophrenic about it, since if nationalism becomes too autonomous or dynamic, this threatens both its domestic authority and its room for manoeuvre abroad (particularly in pursuing a ‘pragmatic’ policy of economic modernisation). As such, Russian nationalism is arguably a bigger threat to the Russian elite than to the West. Nevertheless, the Russian elite lacks a consistent alternative legitimating ideology apart from nationalism, which increases temptations to ‘ride the nationalist tiger’. Such conflicting imperatives may continue to make Russia a trickier and certainly more unpredictable international partner than if its policies were founded on a consistent ideological nationalism.

The three faces of Russian nationalism: official, cultural and political

Three analytically distinct (but in practice somewhat overlapping) conceptions are used here to delineate aspects of Russian nationalism: official nationality represents state approaches, discourses and ideology outlined in Kremlin statements, presidential addresses, and foreign policy doctrines. This has strong functional continuities with the ‘official nationality’ practised in Tsarist Russia from the 1830s. The division between cultural nationalism and political nationalism is one outlined by John Hutchinson (1994). The goal of cultural nationalism is defence and activation of the historical community; Russian cultural nationalism is principally the mainstream intellectual and media discourse and symbols that aim to reinforce the historical, moral and social aspects of a distinct Russian ‘national’ way of life and thereby build a sense of national solidarity; political nationalism is simply nationalism explicitly aimed at capturing political institutions for the ‘nation’, i.e. electoral and social mobilisation around nationalist motifs.

These three aspects are not autonomous: the state actively shapes the relationship between them as part of what might be called ‘managed nationalism’. Broadly speaking, official nationality sets down the parameters for the cultural and political sphere which are allowed some autonomy within (and even, occasionally, beyond) these limits as long as they do not fundamentally challenge it. Indeed, as we will see, cultural nationalism’s emphasis on a unique Russian ‘civilisation’ conflicts with the European emphasis of official nationalism. However political nationalism is
more rigorously controlled, since the regime continually attempts to co-opt or prevent non-sanctioned nationalist mobilisation.

The focus of this article is unavoidably state-centric. This is not to argue that all Russian nationalism is state-created, nor to ignore bottom-up, ‘objective’ socio-economic factors which have driven an increase in ethnic Russian nationalist sentiment. For example, Russia’s dramatic economic turnaround since 2000 and increasing political stability underpins a renewed search for both an agreed national identity and enhanced international status. Simultaneously, ethnic Russians have moved from being a 52-per cent bare majority in the internationalist, multinational Soviet empire to an 80-per cent predominance in the Russian Federation, which has naturally boosted national and cultural re-assertion. However, given the projected demographic decline of ethnic Russians relative to the domestic Muslim population and an increasing influx of labour migrants, a reassertion of ethnic self-awareness that is arguably a necessary stage of Russia’s adaptation from empire to nation-state has developed potentially inflammatory consequences. Given the unregulated legal framework for immigrants, and a lack of integration programmes, the soil for popular xenophobic statements is fertile indeed (Dubas 2008).

‘Managed nationalism’ is simply a subset of ‘managed pluralism’, the way an ‘electoral authoritarian’ regime sets the agenda for ‘healthy’ socio-political competition and stigmatises those outside its ‘imposed consensus’ (Gel’man 2002; Balzer 2003). Edwin Bacon further qualifies this process as ‘Snatch-squad authoritarianism’, whereby the regime does not aim to eliminate pluralism, but periodically intervenes to remove ‘ringleaders’ and ‘trouble-makers’ before organised anti-regime opposition emerges (Bacon 2003). Similarly ‘managed nationalism’ permits forms of nationalism that do not fundamentally challenge the authoritarian state, which gives an inbuilt advantage to illiberal and even extremist forms, but tends to be inimical to most forms of liberal nationalism, which are seen as anti-system because they challenge elite authority.

‘Official nationality’ – the national idea as ideology

Does the Russian state have an ideology, let alone a nationalist one? Many would disagree. A state ideology is unconstitutional in Russia, and key elite figures from Putin to Medvedev have spoken against the imposition of such an ideology ‘in any form’ (Putin 2000). As part of the widespread reaction against Marxism-Leninism, there has been a widespread reaction against inflexible and constraining doctrines and dogmas – what Putin has called communist ‘ideological cockroaches’ (Ibid.). Communism collapsed at a time when the Russian elite had no clear vision of a new political system: communism and fascism were discredited, and the skin-deep adherence to liberal democracy was also profoundly shaken in the 1990s; instead, the replacement of any coherent ideology by ‘pragmatism’ (and in foreign policy, the pragmatism of ‘national interests’), has been one of the key features of the regime (Shevstova 2007). As Stephen Hanson argues, at least in 1990s Russia there was an ‘end of ideology’, where appeal to ideological principle was practically almost impossible (Hanson 2003). According to many, Russia is a Russia Inc. of profits and pragmatism (Trenin 2007a). Russia is one of the ‘least ideological countries in the world’ where (financial) interests reign supreme and ideas barely matter (Trenin 2007b).

1 For detailed discussion see Russia Profile, 4:7, August-September 2007.
Nevertheless, the regime itself has an ambivalent, but increasingly positive attitude to ideology. According to Okara (2007), the lack of a grand systemic project for Russia’s transformation is one of Russia’s key contemporary problems, since strictly pragmatic motivations or emphases on stability cannot ensure social mobilisation or cohesion. Shlapentokh (2008) argues that the Russian elite are acutely aware that they are ideologically ‘naked’ before their own population and the world, prompting a lack of confidence in their own legitimacy and a quest for ideas to motivate and consolidate population. Hence the increasing emphasis from 1996 onwards on the search for a ‘national idea’, which though articulated by the state, allegedly emanates from the populace as a whole rather than the political elite, and provides orientation and values to fill the post-Leninist ideological vacuum, without the strict prescriptions and proscriptions of the former ‘state religion’.

Certainly, this ‘national idea’ is inconsistent and contested: the ‘Kremlin’ is a group of factions, not a monolithic entity, and the emergent national idea (as we shall see) contains numerous inconsistencies. Symptomatically, it has been associated with number of labels, depending on time, audience and context, from conservatism, centrism, ‘managed democracy’, ‘sovereign democracy’ and in its latest, evolving incarnation as part of the revised 2008 programme of the ruling ‘party of power’ United Russia: ‘Russian conservatism.’ Nevertheless, at the core of this ‘national idea’ is an increasingly consistent world-view and set of assumptions (Evans 2008). It is increasingly convincing to view this as ‘something close to an ideology’ (Duncan 2007: 139). After all, consistency is a necessary quality of political philosophies, not ideologies (Freeden 1998). Furthermore, the emergent national idea is an ideology in the Marxist/Gramscian sense of providing a legitimation for ruling class power and hegemony (particularly in terms of providing a set of ‘everyday’ and ‘commonsense’ popular assumptions) and in the Western political science sense of providing a broad set of inter-related ideas that structure political discourse and action, explain how society is and should be, particularly (as we shall see), since these ideas are increasingly transmitted through state symbols, the state-run media, education, and through the dominant party United Russia. Certainly, the ‘national idea’ is often adapted to political conjuncture with an opportunism bordering on cynicism (Kozhevennikova 2004), but this in itself can be seen as a continuation of Leninist political praxis.

What then are the core assumptions of the emergent national idea? However labelled, the consistent themes in the Putin era are re-formulations of those first found in Putin’s ‘Millennium Manifesto’ (Putin 2000): an emphasis on a distinct Russian modernisation project which draws its inspiration from Russia’s 1000-year old traditions. Essentially this is a Russian moderate conservatism, with themes such as defence of tradition and organic society being instantly recognisable from Western conservatism. Even the ‘non-ideological’ nature of this ideology is a common feature of conservatism, which tends to spurn ideology in favour of arguments related to pragmatism, experience and history. Moreover, the emphasis on cultural, moral and spiritual values, patriotism and statehood shows the natural affinity between nationalism and conservatism.

This can be regarded as a ‘moderate’ conservatism because, although Putin has drawn on a wide range of sources (including notably in one presidential address, Franklin Roosevelt’s ‘New Deal’), the greatest intellectual influence appears to be from so-called ‘liberal’ conservatives of the late 19th and early 20th century as part of a conscious adherence to a non-communist intellectual tradition - figures such as Witte, Struve, Klyuchevskii, as well as Dmitrii Likhachev (Sakwa 2008b, Bacon...
2006). Also influential are ‘White’ anti-communist conservatives such as Ivan Il’in, Nikolai Berdyaev and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who emphasise Russia’s spiritual and cultural continuity and uniqueness. According to some, ‘Slavophile’ conservative nationalist emphases can be traced in Putin’s accent on civic solidarity, culture as an organism of nation-building and ideology, and education and science as creative forces preventing social and military conflicts (Okara 2007). However, there is little of Slavophilism’s nostalgic anti-modernism and anti-liberalism. But to call this ‘liberal conservatism’ as does Sakwa (2008b/c) goes too far: certainly the role of the individual and human rights is accepted, as is constitutionalism and economic liberalism, but there is little acceptance of the liberal philosophy underpinning this. Putin’s often-quoted phrase that Russia ‘will not become a second edition of…the U.S. or Britain, where liberal values have deep historic traditions’ (2000: 14) can be understood as implying that a liberal and strong state are antitheses, and at the very least equivocates about liberalism’s value to Russia. Evans’ view that Putin’s worldview is illiberal rather than anti-liberal seems apt (Evans 2008).

The modern triad of official nationality: Autocracy, Sovereignty, Nationality

To some, Putin’s ‘national idea’ has profound similarities to Tsarist ‘Official Nationality’, as most cogently expressed by Count Uvarov’s famous triad of ‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality’ of 1831 onwards (cf. Okara 2007; Stent 2008; Lucas 2008). The implication is that this is largely a reactionary nationalism masquerading as modernity, or as Angela Stent argues (2008: 1092) Putin’s Russia resembles ‘a twenty-first century version of the Tsarist patrimonial state.’ Dividing contemporary Official Nationality into a triad is obvious simplification, but it does help isolate the continuities and changes in the current national idea.

It is argued here that the similarity is profoundly in function and not content: contemporary official nationality is far more modern, moderate and secular than previous versions. However, it plays functionally the same role: that is not of expressing nationalism, but monopolising it and channeling it in the interest of the autocratic state. After all, originally Uvarov’s triad arose to counteract the revolutionary slogans of Liberté, Égalité et Fraternité by co-opting nationalism in service of state and Tsar and thereby imposing unity and stability over the Russian empire. As is well known, there were similar reflexes at work in the USSR under Stalin and Brezhnev, with the co-option of the emotional appeal of Russian nationalism to supplement the rational, scientific appeal of Marxism-Leninism (e.g. Mitrokhin 2003). The principle was the same: the adoption of select Russian nationalist symbols and traditions once they had been rendered politically harmless (Vujacic 2007). The cultural values of the dominant imperial nation (the Russian language, Orthodoxy) were adopted as a ‘state-forming’ nation, but non-sanctioned forms of Russian nationalism (e.g. the Slavophiles, Solzhenitsyn) were occasionally severely punished.

Autocracy: this is a difficult concept to isolate because modern authoritarian regimes have become adept at speaking the language of democracy. The contemporary Russian state (in accordance with the constitution article one) is a demokratischesoe federativnoe pravovoe gosudarstvo and not a samoderzhavie, and only a few outspoken members of the elite vocalise publicly their predilection for ‘autocratic self-government’ (samoderzhavnoe samoupravlenie) (Tret’yakov 2007). However, using the original Greek meaning of ‘self-rule’ (rather than dictatorship as it is often translated), ‘autocracy’ accurately captures the emphasis on Russian ‘stateness’ or
raison d’État (gosudarstvenichestvo/gosudarstvennost’) whereby the state possesses a spiritual, sacred quality as the distillation of Russia’s ‘collective will’, and is not (fundamentally) limited by any earthly power. Putin’s axiom that the ‘centralised state is… practically in Russia’s DNA’ is often quoted (Putin 2000: 86). The first line of Russia’s (post-2000) national anthem puts it as succinctly: Rossiya – nasha derzhava (‘Russia — our sacred Great Power’). In this telling, the Russian state is truly autocratic: the principal and unhindered agent of Russia’s ‘1000-year history of statehood’. In international relations, the search for ‘Great Power status’ (derzhavnost’/derzhavnichestvo) is almost a national mission. Similarly, the ‘autocracy’ well-describes the Russian state’s domestic role, where the regime is constantly above class and party. The authorities preserve their freedom of manoeuvre vis-à-vis political constraints and a ‘leading and guiding role’ in managed pluralism: for instance the President remains the primary guarantor of the constitution (not the constitutional court) and the Prime Minister can ‘lead’ the United Russia party without being a member of it.

Clearly, historical parallels can be stretched too far. Though there have been obvious traces of the ‘cult of statehood’ and the beneficent Tsar as ‘answerable to no-one but God’ in Putin’s daily governing style and mini-cult (see below), the contemporary Russian state is venerated, but far from absolutely sacrosanct, and cannot realistically be seen as a modern replica of the gendarme-state proposed by Nikolai I. Notably, presidential addresses are replete with rhetoric about constitutionalism and the encouragement of civil society and the party system (however poorly implemented in practice). Indeed, the post-2008 ‘tandemocracy’ between President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin involves a potential (if not yet actual) sharing of state power, perhaps unprecedented in Russian history, and Medvedev (2008) has explicitly criticised ‘the cult of the state and the alleged wisdom of the administrative apparatus’ in terms no Tsar would use.

The broader historical similarity holds true however. Contemporary official nationality is at most only quasi-nationalistic; as under Stalin this is ‘Russo-centric etatism’ rather than Russian nationalism (Brandenburger 1999). Indeed, central to its discourse is the Russian state (gosudarstvo) and people (narod) but almost never nation (natsiya). Even when this phrase appears, as it did for the first time in 2004, it is seen in civic rather than ethnic terms: Rossiiskaya natsiya (nation of Russian citizens) not Russkaya natsiya (ethnic Russian nation). This is not to deny that Putin was more Russocentric and careless with his use of the word Russkii in his early years of office, but there appears to have been latterly a conscious effort to excise this word from official use in deference to Russia’s multinationality – indeed for Putin, the ‘Russian idea’ is Rossiiskaya, not Russkaya.

The subordination of nationalism to statism is a notable feature of contemporary Russian foreign policy doctrine too, which, as many have outlined, envisages a Hobbesian competition between states as the primary actors, operating according to ‘national interests’ defined by the state and not the nation as such (e.g. Lo 2006). Official nationality was traditionally concerned more with internal state unity and stability than foreign policy, and its exponents regarded the expansionist sentiments of nationalists like the pan-Slavists of the late 19th century as subversive (Duncan 2000). Indeed, as Astrid Tuminez argues, Russian foreign policy makers have traditionally tried to preserve their autonomy from Russian nationalist sentiment exactly as they do in domestic policy – nationalism has only ‘rarely and briefly’ impacted on foreign policy (Tuminez 2000: 6). Putin’s post 9/11 ‘Westward tilt’,
which disgusted many genuine Russian nationalists, was one of the starkest recent examples of the primacy of *étatisme* over nationalist sentiment.

_Sovereignty:_ ‘Sovereign democracy’ has been one of the most-discussed aspects of ‘the national idea’. In content, it is little more than a detailed distillation of familiar themes (after all, Russia’s 1993 Constitutional Preamble refers to ‘sovereign statehood’) that supplement and reinforce the above-noted desire for the domestic and international autonomy of the (autocratic) state. Yet the balance between its core terms has been controversial. Its vagueness and the fact that (directly contrary to its intention) it drew increased international attention to Russia’s democracy deficit has meant it has been somewhat downgraded in the Medvedev era, which prefers to refer Russia as a democracy, period. Yet, sovereign democracy has not been abandoned: in 2008 United Russia referred to itself as the ‘party of Russian conservatism and sovereign democracy’, whilst Medvedev’s July 2008 foreign policy doctrine decried attempts to ‘lower the role of the sovereign state in international relations’ (*Kontseptsiya* 2008).

The author of sovereign democracy, Vladislav Surkov and its defenders argue that it is a way of re-planting democracy in Russian political culture after the cataclysmic 1990s - when *demokratiya* became *dermokratiya* (crapocracy), being perceived as a Western import without any domestic legitimacy. It allegedly does not involve negating universal practices, but simply allows Russia to find its own path to democracy (*Suverenitet* 2006; *Suverennaya demokratiya* 2007; *Pro suverennuyu demokratiyu* 2007). Surkov (2007) argues that there are recognisably national models of democracy in France, Britain and Germany, and they all have a mix of the universal and specific. Sergei Lavrov argues that Russia’s choice of democracy is final but it can only develop gradually (Lavrov 2007).

Critics of sovereign democracy argue that it is precisely the attempt to negate universal principles, to limit the influx of Western liberal ideas and practices and in general rebut outside interference in Russian political system, that has arisen in direct response to the threat of ‘coloured revolution’ in 2003-4, which is universally portrayed as an result of Western ‘revolution-for-export’ rather than a domestic revolt (e.g. Popescu 2006). The critics have a powerful case here, particularly since sovereign democracy was formulated in parallel with well-documented measures such as legal restrictions on NGOs, the limiting of foreign election observers and sustained Russian rhetoric about Western democratic ‘double standards’. However, although sovereign democracy marks a move from hard to soft power and an attempt to make the Russian model of ‘democracy’ more attractive in response to the ‘coloured virus’, whether it marks an attempt to subvert the Western democratisation agenda more consistently and provide the ideological basis for a new ‘authoritarian international’ may be doubted, particularly since Russia’s new ‘democracy promotion’ NGO the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation that it registered in New York and Paris in January 2008 had developed little presence over a year later.²

Moreover, sovereign democracy is not really a theory of democracy at all – it should rather be called democratic sovereignty, or even just sovereignty. Robert Amsterdam rightly observes that it is ‘Sovereign, perhaps, but democratic? Not even close’ (Amsterdam 2006). The integrity of Russian democracy is simply stipulated as an unarguable fact and little concrete is proposed either as to how Russian democracy can or should develop or how specifically it differs from liberal democracy. Where this is intimated at all it becomes clear that Russian democracy is envisaged as a

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² See the website in progress at http://www.indemco.org/.
Rousseauian plebiscitary democracy. As Ivan Krastev (2007) notes, the chief intellectual origins are Francois Guizot and Carl Schmitt, who emphasised ‘decisionism’ - anti-revolutionism, anti-populism and anti-pluralism; the ‘sovereign’ is neither the people nor voters, but reason embodied in consensus of responsible national elites. Although from a different ideological perspective, and with different emphases, we have just another justification for Russian gosudarstvennost’. The Russian state is portrayed as being legitimate and democratic because it is an accurate reflection of the volonté générale. Such a conception lacks Aristotle’s fundamental principal that the consent of the people cannot be the decisive measure of democracy: mere majority rule is tyranny because it does not permit any change of ruler. Moreover, sovereign democracy depoliticises the Russian state, and reinforces the above-noted preference for the state to be accorded an autonomous, supra-political role. Sovereignty is seen as both internal: the right of a state to govern its own people according to their (state-defined) interests and external: the right of a state to conduct an independent foreign policy in defence of its own national interests. Much of the discussion of sovereignty is explicitly about maintaining economic competitiveness on the world arena, with both Putin and Surkov declaring that Russia’s national interests are economic modernisation and competitiveness (e.g. Surkov 2006).

What results is schizophrenic. On one hand, Russia is eager to be recognised as a normal country meeting world standards of democracy but having its own sovereign sphere (rather like the US, despite being ‘European’). The illiberal and ‘nationalistic’ emphasis is implicit rather than explicit: sovereign democracy refers to Western political rationalism and economic expediency rather than traditional Russophile arguments about cultural specificity, spirituality or tradition. Be that as it may, sovereign democracy places heavy reliance on the rhetoric of exceptionalism, and a generally favourable reaction from Russian nationalists like Aleksandr Prokhanov indicates that it can be presented as simply an alternative argument for a Russian Sonderweg (cf. Makarychev 2008).

Nationality. Nationality (Narodnost’) was always the most controversial element of Uvarov’s triad, subordinate to the imperatives of Orthodoxy and Autocracy (Westwood 2002). Contemporary official nationality expounds a relatively clear moderate pro-European nationalism, which however, conflicts with the above-noted emphasis on the primacy of the state, and, as explored below, is further undermined by the markedly more anti-Western cultural nationalism expounded by the Kremlin.

In the Kremlin’s repeated telling, Russia is unambiguously a European state and part of European civilisation, albeit the emphasis on sovereignty indicates a desire to be ‘part of Europe but apart from Europe’ and to propound a view of an illiberal ‘greater Europe’ that many EU states would not themselves recognise. However, Russia declares itself unwilling to pursue any kind of explicit messianic ideological project or to propound a ‘clash of civilisations. Contrary to some interpretations (e.g. Umland 2002; Smith 2005) there is little direct influence of Eurasianism as a doctrine. Marlene Laruelle argues that the Kremlin never uses ‘Eurasian’ as a term (it prefers ‘Euro-Asian’): absent is the influence of ‘Russian civilisation’, determinist geopolitics, imperial expansion and inevitable conflict with the West evident in the thought of prominent Eurasianists such as Aleksandr Dugin (Laruelle 2008). It is not clear that this is even a ‘pragmatic Eurasianism’ (Sakwa 2008c: 269), rather than just pragmatism: a recognition that Russia has a multi-vector foreign policy and has

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1 One of the few occasions when Putin talked about Russia’s ‘civilising mission in Eurasia’, he explicitly tied it with the spread of democratic values (2005 state-of-the-nation address, cited in Chadaev, 2005).
interests in both Europe and Asia - as Putin has stated, Russia is both European and Asian, and must fly with both wings.

What is the most fundamental break from the ‘official nationality’ of the Tsarist past is that the view of nationality proffered is profoundly secular – Russian Orthodoxy is not part of the contemporary triad. The Church does not figure in foreign policy concepts, Presidential state of the nation-addresses or (explicitly) in the concept of sovereign democracy. In principle, the national idea is profoundly multinational and multi-confessional. This is not to deny that the Russian Orthodox Church is ‘first among equals’ in relation to Russia’s other traditional religions, both in the 1997 Law on Religions and repeated elite statements that refer to its unique role in defending Russian statehood throughout history, to a degree that may be unconstitutional.

Ultimately, however, although there may be individuals in the Kremlin and Church hierarchy who dream of an Orthodox Empire, and, as outlined below, the Church often actively supports state initiatives, rapprochement between Church and State falls a long-way short of the Tsarist ‘symphonic ideal’ of a fusion of secular and religious power, or the nationalist idea of a ‘Third Rome’ exercising its civilizing mission against the decadent West. According to Aleksandr Verkhovsky (2006), despite personal strong Orthodox convictions, both Putin (and Medvedev) appear to have decided against too close liaison between Church and state, and repeatedly emphasise a ‘spiritual’, not confessional, state identity, whilst insisting on secularism and the need for freedom of conscience. A certain distancing of the state from Orthodoxy was notable from 2002-3 onwards: this paralleled Putin’s desire to suppress all centres of autonomous activity – there was apparently little reason to make an exception for the Church. Moreover, the Orthodox Church itself does not want to regain a position of total dependence on the state. Unsurprisingly, after Patriarch Kirill’s inauguration in January 2009, his definition of ‘symphony’ between Church and state involved mutual non-interference, and respect for democratic, constitutional principles, and the Church concentrating on the spiritual, rather than the earthly realm.

Moreover, there has been increasing Kremlin attention to the needs of Russia’s other ‘traditional religions’ that has received less coverage in the Western press. Most notably the state has increasingly addressed the needs of Russian Islam. In Malaysia in 2003, Putin stated that Russia was a ‘Muslim power’, and Russia even joined the Organisation of Islamic Conference (with observer status) in 2005. Whilst such gestures had little impact on the daily life of Russia’s Muslims, they were regarded by many as of immense symbolic importance: neither Tsarist Russia nor the USSR could conceivably ever have taken such steps. Whilst it is possible to portray such decisions as driven by Eurasianism, they also have clearly pragmatic motives: namely greater attention to fostering the loyalty of Muslims to the Russian state after the second Chechen war and 9/11. Similarly, Putin unambiguously rejects the anti-Semitism that has traditionally been the lingua franca of extreme Russian nationalism. According to Vladimir Shlapentokh (2008), Putin has said more positive words about Jews than all Russian leaders before him: he publicly meets with Russia’s chief Rabbis; he has denounced anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, and in his personnel policy displayed a total ignorance of the ethnic background of candidates for office. While it is true that Putin has never criticized the anti-Semitic tirades of his

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close ally Ahmadinejad, the logic of sovereign democracy implies that commenting on partners’ domestic policies is simply not Russia’s practice.

The repeated emphasis on Russian’s multi-cultural, multi-confessional and multinational nature should not obscure that official nationality is at times prone to Russocentrism. For instance, a number of draft laws promulgated by the United Russia Party on Russian language and culture have incited comment because of their emphasis on Russians as the ‘state-forming’ nation, an uncomfortable echo of Russians’ Soviet-era status as benign elder brother in the communist fraternity. Nevertheless, the tortuous and lengthy legislative process indicates that this Russocentrism is controversial even within Russia, and latter legislative drafts have tried to observe greater sensitivity to minority sentiment (Zvereva 2007).

So all in all, contemporary Russian ‘official nationality’ has strong continuities with the Tsarist and Soviet past: it is a conservative nationalism that venerates, justifies and is subordinate to state interests. Similarly, contemporary official nationality is primarily focussed on internal achieving internal stability and order through inculcating loyalty to the authorities in the face of external threats (in this case ‘Orange-ism’ rather than revolutionary nationalism). However, there are marked discontinuities also: the focus on pragmatism and economic modernisation, secularism and the selective adoption of democratisation rhetoric (albeit without profound acceptance of its liberal philosophical underpinnings). Altogether, this makes contemporary official nationality a far more ambiguous ideology than its forbears. As Easter (2008) argues, the Russian state still sees itself as leading the nation down a unique Russian path, but it now does so without benefit of divine will or historical destiny. Ultimately the state tries to maintain its domestic and foreign policy autonomy from nationalism. But as a consequence, official nationalism lacks the mobilising and modernisation dynamism it pretends to. Moreover, its inherent vagueness about the nature of Russian distinctiveness provides broad parameters for social groups (especially religious and nationalist ones) to advance their own more concrete propositions in society at large (Verkhovsky 2006).

Cultural nationalism: reinforcing the primacy of civilisation

However, when we turn from concept to execution, and observe how the Russian authorities actively seek to shape discussion of state and nation, we confront a less ambiguous picture. As several observers note, this is particular marked in the state-run mass media, which propagates a ‘civilisational nationalism’ (Pain 2007; Laruelle 2007). Here, the discourse is far less about economic modernisation, pragmatism and Europeanism, and far more concerned with emphases on Russian cultural, historical and spiritual distinctiveness. Indeed the view of Russia as a distinct civilisation inexorably but unwillingly drawn into a clash of civilisations with a West determined to divide and rule it has become ‘politically correct’ in Russian internal discourse.\footnote{In Russia, as Jutta Scherrer (2008) argues, ‘politically correct’ entails supporting state interests, and has little notion of social, moral acceptability.}

For example, one of the most obvious manifestations of ‘civilisational’ nationalism is the movement of formerly marginal extreme nationalists from the margins to the mainstream as now apparently ‘respectable’ public commentators: apart from the ever-present Vladimir Zhirinovskii, most attention is paid to Aleksandr Dugin, whose ideas have received an appreciative audience in the highest political and military echelons, but Mikhail Leont’ev, Aleksandr Prokhanov, Sergei Kurginyan...
and Nataliya Narochnitskaya are also prominent. Generally such commentators do not expound in the media the full panoply of their views, which in some cases are imperialistic and even quasi-fascist, but all support views which are reinforce an image of a Russia as a ‘besieged fortress’ under attack from anti-Western machinations (e.g. Umland 2007).

Similarly, state-run channels such as Channel One do present a pluralism of views, but their commentators either rarely challenge nationalist, racist or xenophobic prejudices, or themselves offer a strongly nationalist editorial line. For example, the Channel One discussion programme *Sudite sami* ran two roundtables on the 2008 American presidential elections, which brought together a wide range of domestic and foreign commentators. Despite ostensible pluralism, presenter Maxim Shevchenko propounded a strongly anti-American editorial line. In post-election coverage on November 6, 2008 Shevchenko concluded that ‘American policy is implemented, despite the presence of democratic procedures, not by democracy but Americans’ financial possibilities’. In a discussion on 5 December 2008 about NATO, his conclusion accused NATO of dismembering Yugoslavia, occupying Iran and Afghanistan. Similar views are expressed by such Channel One shows as *Moment istiny*, *K bar’ eru* and many police/security themed serials (Zvereva 2007).

Michael Billig has famously distinguished between ‘hot’ or ‘flagged’ nationalism that appears more transparently in state symbols and projects, and ‘banal’ nationalism that encompasses ‘unflagged’ everyday, routinised and subtextual representations of the nation which penetrate mainstream discourse (Billig 1995). Channel One’s nationalist discourse is an example of the blending of flagged (direct editorial comment) and unflagged, banal nationalism (ostensible pluralism that reinforces the nationalist editorial line). Several recent Russian films also promote a ‘banal’ civilisational nationalist consensus. For example, the 2008 film *Admiral* produced by Channel One glorified Alexander Kolchak, a former White naval hero who briefly became Supreme Governor of Russia before being shot by the Bolsheviks. The film avoided discussion of both Red and White terrors (including some 25,000 people allegedly killed by Kolchak’s forces in one day), and appeared to support the Kremlin’s insistence that the Red and White streams in Russian history should be blended (itself a policy originally proposed by Aleksandr Prokhanov and Gennadii Zyuganov). It was even alleged that the actor playing Kolchak (Konstantin Khabensky) modelled his mannerisms on Putin. The *St Petersburg Times* saw *Admiral* as the ‘latest in a series of historical epics that resurrect pre-revolutionary Russian heroes who battle bravely against impossible odds, dogged by foreign villains.’ The victory of Aleksandr Nevskii, the 13th century Russian prince who defeated numerous foreign invaders, in the 2008 ‘Name of Russia’ TV contest gave a similar impression. Russia is obviously not alone in producing nationalist films of dubious historical accuracy (for example Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart* and *Patriot*, and many British war films), but in context such portrayals merely buttress the civilisational nationalist consensus.

Other aspects of banal nationalism that reinforce a strongly conservative, if not reactionary, nationalist line and are actively encouraged by the state include the mini-Putin leadership cult. Although this received a contemporary upgrade with the former president being presented as an austere business manager, the image of the benevolent Father-Tsar is never far away, and was even incorporated into Putin’s December 2008 prime ministerial phone-in, when he invited the Varfolomeev family

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6 Cited in http://www.russiablog.org/2008/10/admiral_kolchak_russian_film_review.php
to celebrate New Year with him around the Kremlin Christmas tree. Although Easter (2008) argues that the mini-cult was largely sustained by unofficial popular and commercial forces, the stage-managed invocation of Putin as ‘national leader’ prior to the 2007-8 elections indicates otherwise.

Furthermore, formerly extreme and marginal Russian nationalist axioms are now deeply intertwined with mainstream Russian political discourse. Words like Derzhava, Velikaya Rossiya and Russofobiya that in the 1990s were the preserve of the so-called ‘red-browns’ are now prevalent (for example ‘Russophobia’ was first popularised by Igor’ Shafarevich with an anti-Semitic undertone). Although the Kremlin itself rarely uses such overtly nationalistic words, its use of Aesopian terms like ‘apples [liberals] and lemons [fascists] growing on the same branch’ (Surkov) and more direct allusions such as ‘foreign jackals’ and ‘comrade Wolf’ (Putin) invokes the same Stalinist discourse of foreign enemies and conspiracies, with the West (and the US in particular) as the hostile ‘Other’. Moreover, such a political discourse provides inadequate public understandings of nationalism and extremism that (as explored more below) make the Russian authorities ill-equipped to combat nationalist extremism. For example, many like the United Russia ideologue Ivan Demidov (quoted in Umland 2008) assert that ‘Russian’ and ‘fascism’ are antonyms. ‘Fascism’ is such a widely used political insult (regularly used against the Baltic states for example) that it loses all concrete meaning. In general, the elite shares the Stalinist understandings that state the state itself cannot be nationalistic: its appropriation of nationalistic discourse is merely ‘patriotism’ (Voronkov and Karpenko 2007).

More ‘flagged’ and obvious forms of cultural nationalism have included the state symbols: the adoption of the Soviet national anthem with new words and the Tsarist state symbols in 2000 was clearly intended to demonstrate the unity of Russian history and reinforce Putin’s view that a period of state consolidation had replaced democratic revolutionism. But other aspects of the state’s attitude to its past have provoked widespread fears of selective re-Stalinisation, including the emphasis on military patriotism in schools, military parades and the cult of victory in the Great Patriotic War, which is angrily defended against ‘fascists’ in the Baltic states who do not see the Soviet forces in World War II as liberators (e.g. Blum 2006).

A closer inspection of the regime’s view of history reveals it to be more ambiguous than some Western stereotypes: this marks an attempt venerate certain elements of the Soviet and pre-Soviet past without a full-scale rehabilitation of Stalin. However, as Vujacic argues (2007), the Soviet past is only ‘usable past’ in living memory for a state-builder, and attempts to use it invariably risk Stalin’s partial rehabilitation. However, the emphasis on ‘victory’ in WWII increases the risk, by precluding the discussion of Stalin’s mistakes and crimes, and without the active, systematic inculcation of a liberal conservatism, any Soviet conservatism will have permanent bias towards illiberal motifs and symbols.

This ambiguity pervades regime views of the Soviet era. On one hand both Putin and Surkov have been highly critical of communist ideology, and even called Stalin ‘criminal’. They have placed constant pressure on the communist party to reform. On the 70th anniversary of the purges, Putin was forthright, when visiting in October 2007 a memorial and church built at a site (Butovskii Poligon on the edge of Moscow) where 20,000 were executed under Stalin. He stated: ‘those who were

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7 More nuanced understandings can be found in for example, Surkov (2006:74) where he attacks ‘national isolationists’ as quasi-Nazis.
executed, sent to camps, shot and tortured number in the thousands and millions of people... were...the pride of the nation...We need to do a great deal to ensure that this is never forgotten’ (Kishkovsky 2007). Yet this was the first time Putin had joined public commemorations of the repressions, and the authorities usually ignored the entire topic. On other occasions, Putin indicated that the Stalin question was essentially closed: the USSR had dealt with issues such as the purges and the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in the Gorbachev period, and Russia therefore has no more need to make continuous apologies than other countries who have propagated crimes potentially far worse (such as the Hiroshima bomb). Overall, the concern with stability appears to be paramount, and whilst the pro-Stalin constituency was not to be placated, nor was it to be offended. Putin was unwilling to return Dzerzhinskii’s statue to the Lubyanka, or to bring back the name of Stalingrad, but despite probable private inclinations, there was no public proposal to remove Lenin’s tomb from Red Square. Symptomatically, in June 2007, Putin opposed United Russia’s proposals to remove the hammer and sickle emblem from the WWII victory banner used in May Victory Day celebrations at the suggestion of the leftist Just Russia party, most probably to court the communist electorate.

The most controversial aspect of the Kremlin’s re-Stalinisation was a 2007 School History textbook (Filippov 2007). Although far from whitewashing the Soviet period, criticism of Stalin in particular was decidedly muted (‘the worst that can be said of him is that he is controversial’), and his role as war leader, industrialiser and even ‘good manager’ was reinforced (Benn 2008). Moreover, the purges were portrayed as beginning only in 1937 (thereby sidestepping thorny questions such as the Ukrainian famine), and the book even had a chapter on sovereign democracy that presented the Putin period in glowing light. The book is however, one of many, and as yet has had little impact on the school curriculum (Babich 2008a).

Overall, the Kremlin’s view of the Soviet past recalls Brezhnev (the active inculcation of ‘patriotic’ symbols without the direct mention of Stalin) and Khrushchev alike (the focus on the defects of the Stalinist personality rather than the Stalinist system: Stalin has no systemic preconditions or systemic legacy, and once the question has been discussed, it is closed). What emerges is directly contradictory. On one hand the USSR is criticised as being overly bureaucratic and centralised and in hock to obsolete ideology, and Russia’s emergence from the USSR is an act of national liberation; on the other, it is seen as a continuation of Russia’s victorious tradition of 1000-year old statehood. Whilst the Kremlin’s view of history is far more nuanced than extreme nationalist views that the fall of USSR was engineered by a Western/Jewish/Masonic plot, it perhaps raises just as many questions.

Finally, despite the above-noted state commitments to multi-culturalism and multi-confessionalism, the Russian Orthodox Church has been the main independent actor reinforcing the civilisational nationalist consensus. Church statements often support Russia’s greatness and criticise the ‘new world order’ and human rights, emphasising community and concordance. Most notably in 2007, the World Council of Russian People refuted Western human rights doctrines, criticised liberal democracy and approved the Russian Doctrine, a conservative, nationalist document authored by number of clerics and academics as a basis for an alternative Russian idea. Although some see the World Council as designed to provide a safety-valve for nationalist views within the Church (Mitrofanova 2005), its patronage by the Patriarch cannot help but give its pronouncements semi-official status.

Moreover, the Church courted controversy by promoting the ‘Foundations of Orthodox Culture’ course as a compulsory weekly subject for all state school grades, and succeeded in doing so in a number of Russian regions. Yet this appears to have been despite, rather than because of, the Kremlin’s wishes (the Ministry of Education supports a ‘Foundations of World Religions’ course), and by 2007, firm opposition from intellectual circles and Russia’s Muslim hierarchy had led to a hardening of Kremlin opposition. These and other initiatives from the Church can too easily be interpreted simply as attempts to increase its political influence and even to form a new state religion. On the other hand, much of the Church’s opposition to human rights doctrines is motivated by a desire to resist secularisation, rather than liberalism per se, and (as noted above) the Church resists too close an association with the state. In turn, although the state apparently promotes spirituality in order to strengthen social solidarity and patriotism this is a ‘civil’ religion which includes other traditional confessions besides Orthodoxy (Mitrofanova 2005). Similarly, though all major Russian politicians court the Church, this is less a profession of faith than an exploitation of the Church’s cultural and national qualities. Privately, many Russian politicians probably endorse the comment attributed to Alyaksander Lukashenka: ‘I am an atheist but I am an Orthodox atheist’ (Ibid: 133).

**Political nationalism**

Overall, the Russian authorities are extremely ambivalent towards political nationalism. What emerges is an opportunist and inconsistent policy of (often simultaneously) repressing and stimulating nationalism. The Kremlin appears to believe that it can organise and control a mass patriotic movement: a tendency which has roots in pro-police brigades in the Soviet era (Mitrokhin 2006). Although, according to Lilia Shevtsova (2007), the Kremlin appears to understand the risks of rhetoric and actions designed to mobilise populace by identifying enemies, and (as we have seen with cultural nationalism) tries to reduce it to symbolic actions and rhetoric, this is not often the effect. The belief that the ‘dark side’ of nationalism, including xenophobia and hate crimes, can be defeated essentially by depriving ultranationalists of control of the nationalist agenda constantly risks creating the demands which the Kremlin then has to control.

Certainly, the Kremlin has increasingly grown aware of the dangers of nationalism and extremism. It has long been relatively successful at splitting and marginalising the most extreme nationalists (such as Russian National Unity and the National Bolshevik Party). Most recently, they successfully split the national-populist Motherland Party into a moderate wing (which became the socialist Just Russia party, and which gained official patronage) and an extreme nationalist Great Russia party which was denied legal registration. The ‘Russian March’ on the 4 November Day of National Unity has been denied permission to march in many cities since 2006. In Moscow its unsanctioned demonstrations occur on the Taras Shevchenko Embankment far from public gaze and are heavily policed (although relative to police treatment of liberal opposition marches they are treated softly). Observers have noticed increased state attempts to recognise and prosecute the perpetrators of hate crime (Babich 2008b). Furthermore, key figures such as Putin, Surkov and Medvedev have spoken in no uncertain terms about threat of ‘nationalism’ and extremism (for

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example, Putin mentioned this at his December 2008 prime ministerial phone-in, whilst Medvedev spoke against extremism on the 2008 Russian Unity Day.

Conversely, the Kremlin has proved equally adept at stimulating political nationalism from its semi-official patronage of pocket nationalists, from Zhirinovsky, Lebed’ to Motherland. Most recently noteworthy have been the plethora of ‘anti-orange’ youth groups such as Nashi and United Russia’s youth wing Molodaya gvardiya. On one hand, these attempts to promote a moderate nationalism and warn against extremism and fascism.10 On the other, they have a well-documented vigilante element, links with football hooligans and skinheads, and a tendency to indulge in extremist behaviour themselves. Notably, Nashi and the Moscow group Mestnye have begun to spout vehement anti-immigrant rhetoric (Zarakhovich 2008). Nor are these groups’ activities confined to domestic politics: Nashi and Molodaya gvardiya were involved with the picketing of the British and Estonian ambassadors in 2007-8, whilst analogous pro-Russian groups that defend the Kremlin’s policies and defend ‘compatriots’ have mushroomed in neighbouring countries – for instance, Proryv in Transnistria and groups of ‘Russian citizens’ in Crimea.

In general, the only thing consistent about the Kremlin’s approach to political nationalism is its inconsistency, sometimes breathtaking. For example, the Kremlin’s problems with Motherland started even during the 2003 elections when its success helped drive the liberal Yabloko party out of parliament, ostensibly against the Kremlin’s wishes. In 2005-6, Motherland’s independent exploitation of social discontent raised the spectre that its leader Dmitrii Rogozin would become a Russian ‘Saakashvili’ (i.e. a revolutionary nationalist). Motherland’s removal from the Moscow 2005 elections was on the initiative of the Liberal Democratic Party, which was ironically the first mainstream party to propagate the slogan ‘Russia for the Russians’. But Rogozin’s apparent extremism did not prevent him being appointed Russian ambassador to NATO in 2006 – in this context he was seen as a stern defender of Russian interests.

More instrumental still was United Russia’s controversial nationalist Project Russia (Russkii proekt).11 Project Russia promoted itself as an ideologist of civilisational nationalism and a discussion forum for answering the Russian question and defining Russian identity. UR leaders openly declared that the forum was created to attract the electorate’s chauvinistic sentiments (especially those without a home since the closure of Great Russia). The project’s website had links to nationalist internet resources of both moderate and radical orientation. Scandalous content included nostalgic reminiscences over Stalin’s purges and calls for the creation of a Russian Orthodox ‘Hizbollah’. The project leader Ivan Demidov publicly declared that he admired Aleksandr Dugin. However, Project Russia (alongside the most prominent youth groups such as Nashi) was downgraded as soon as it had no electoral utility, and its website was closed abruptly in Feb 2008. The site team admitted that after the elections, ‘the general financing of patriotic projects was cut off’. According to Stanislav Belkovskii, this was because they spoiled the liberal image of future president Medvedev. But after closure, its head Ivan Demidov (also until that point leader of Molodaya gvardiya) was merely ‘kicked upstairs’ to head UR’s ideological directorate.

Although the Kremlin has become increasingly concerned about the

10 ‘Excerpts from transcript of meeting with members of Russian youth organisations’, 
11 For more see Umland (2008); Khlomogorova (2008); “Perezagruzka” “Russkogo proekta”? 
consequences of nationalism and xenophobia, legal efforts against extreme nationalists remain simply weaker than the authorities’ promotion of it. According to Moscow’s SOVA Centre: ‘inappropriate anti-extremist enforcement [is] much more consistent than the appropriate enforcement’. The primary reasons are: 1) xenophobia and prejudice of the authorities themselves; 2) the lack of mechanisms to ensure appropriate enforcement and to rule out absurd interpretations; 3) ‘legal nihilism’ or poor professionalism of the law-enforcement organs, who consequently fail to ensure the consistency of enforcement even against to truly dangerous ultra-right wing activists, mass media and organizations (Verkhovsky et al/Varga 2008).

As a consequence, extremism laws are consistently rather ambiguously formulated and target either irrelevant or simply the wrong ‘extremists’:

‘New items continue to be…added to the federal list of extremist materials. Not only are many bans clearly unfounded, but … the list lacks identification data and is generally vague, making it likely that someone may inadvertently break the law. Equally alarming is the emerging practice of criminal prosecution and sentencing of individuals for their comments on web forums and blogs, even though the most visited and influential right-wing radical websites continue unchallenged. Similarly, mass media are increasingly targeted by anti-extremist enforcement, even for quoting someone’s opinion without endorsing it’ (Kozhevnikova and Verkhovsky 2008).

The only consistent practice is that potentially destabilising criticism of authorities is regarded as ‘extremism’. Among numerous examples, one of the most recent involved the Russian newspaper Vedomosti being warned by Rossvyazkomnadzor (government media regulator) about the need to adhere to the Law On Extremism, because of a November 6 2008 opinion column by Evgenii Gontmakher in which he advocated a reduction of state control of both economy and politics. Otherwise, he argued, the economic crisis would not be overcome ‘within the framework of the current constitutional system.’ (Gontmakher 2008). Gontmakher is a member of Medvedev’s own ‘think tank’ the Institute of contemporary development, which at the very least indicates a high level of elite-infighting. Among numerous absurdities, one of the biggest scandals was March 2008 anti-extremist warning issued by the Novosibirsk Oblast prosecutor’s office to Vyacheslav Veryovochkin for displaying a white cross on a German tank in a re-enactment of a WWII tank battle. Although the white cross was that still used to this day by German armed forces, the prosecutor’s office deemed it a Nazi symbol, and did not retreat despite the mistake being drawn to its attention by the mass media, eventually fining one of the battle participants.

The above indicates that the Kremlin does not always directly instigate its nationalist excesses. However, the authorities’ official nationality and prevalent ‘civilisational nationalism’ repeatedly give a ‘demand from the top’ for nationalist mobilisation in the context of a hierarchical political system with a long historical memory and inadequate safeguards. For example, Putin’s October 2006 declarations about the need for regional authorities to ‘protect the interests of Russian manufacturers and Russia’s native population’ in the country’s outdoor markets were seen as a signal for harassment of immigrants by local officials and extreme nationalist groups alike. Moreover, the ‘demand from the top’ can lead to a ‘demand from the bottom’ which the Kremlin feels obliged to respond to: there is always a risk of losing the nationalist agenda. The 2006 and 2007 Kremlin disagreements with

12 http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4208/B90F8C0.
13 http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4208/B90F8C0#_ftn38.
Georgia and Estonia were accompanied by a local nationalist mobilisation (including the expulsion of Georgian citizens and cyber-attacks on Estonia websites), that were not discouraged by the Kremlin, but proved thoroughly counter-productive in terms of the Kremlin’s international image. Although in the aftermath of the 2008 Georgia-Russia conflict, the Kremlin took care to prevent similar reprisals against Georgian citizens within Russia, ‘liberal’ president Medvedev’s demands that the Georgian government respect the Russian government, its people and values indicated the increasing projection of a ‘sense of grievance into its foreign policy’ (Caryl 2009). Similarly, Medvedev’s frosty response to Obama’s re-election in his November 2008 state-of-the-nation address may have been prompted, at least in part, by the need to assuage hard-liners within the administration and domestic opinion, a ‘hard-line’ that of course the Kremlin has done much to solidify.

**Conclusion**

It is a vast simplification to see the Russian elite as inherently nationalistic: contemporary ‘official nationality’ is a state-centric ideology promoting a relatively moderate conservatism. This quasi-ideology sees Russia as part of European geography and culture, although politically and historically distinct. Its ‘nationalism’ is moderate in terms of its emphasis on modernisation not anti-modernism, Europe not Eurasia, secularism not the Third Rome and pragmatism not ideological conflict. Officially, the emphasis is on a civic nationalism with an emphasis on Russian citizenship in a multinational state rather than on ethnic or cultural heritage. It is neither expansionist, aggressive nor imperial. Although it promotes a competitive and realist view of the world, its main emphasis is Russia’s right to pursue its national interests autonomously of external interference. The guiding aim is internal and external stability and the preservation of elite power. Ivan Krastev argues (2007) that the regime project is not based on mobilising but controlling ethnic Russian nationalism and using it selectively when necessary. This is half-true: the intention to control is there, the execution not always so efficient.

However, despite its relatively moderate content, official nationality relies on thoroughly traditional rationales and methods of agit-prop. For domestic legitimacy, electoral success and social mobilisation, the regime relies repeatedly on less moderate forms of nationalism which it must continually encourage, contain and co-opt. These forms of nationalism portray the Russian authorities as the only force preventing national destruction and foster a ‘rally-round-the flag’ effect against external enemies. Despite the official preference for an ‘enlightened’ patriotism, the Kremlin provides few safeguards against an unenlightened nationalism. As we have seen, this in part results from the weakness of legal mechanisms and training, but the broader question is whether the Kremlin can have a civic nationalism without a civil society, a liberal nationalism without liberalism? There is every reason to think not. Emil’ Pain (2007) argues, perhaps too categorically, that Russia has no citizens but only subjects. However, his point that in the absence of free public discussion, the questioning of official positions, the promotion of liberal rights and freedoms, anti-racist education, the basis to censure or educate those with real extremist views is absent. The nationalism that emerges will always be biased towards conservative and imperial discourses and against a genuinely liberal nationalism. The Kremlin’s thinking appears to be that the Russian authorities are more liberal than the majority of the public and so nationalism must be contained and not contested. But this approach continually addresses the symptoms and not the cause.
For the outside world, this has ambiguous implications. On one hand, views such as Lucas’ are pure hyperbole: Russia is not consistently promoting an aggressive, assertive, neo-imperialist policy of fundamentally challenging the post-Cold war international system motivated by a fundamentally different system of national values. Moreover, viewing Russia’s policies as invariably motivated by an irrational, aggressive nationalism neatly sidesteps the question of whether Russia’s ‘assertiveness’ actually has some intellectual validity. Though Western policy is not the focus of this article, I certainly agree that if there is a ‘Russia problem’, then there is a ‘West problem’ too (Sakwa 2008a). Western policies have certainly created an environment where the Russian elite can readily portray the nation as isolated, victimised and threatened, even if this an impression which the Kremlin milks opportunistically. That most of this nationalistic rhetoric is for domestic use is shown by the more paranoid, isolationist elements of the cultural, civilisational nationalism that is promoted largely for domestic consumption, and the persistent attempt to subordinate political nationalism to short-term domestic political imperatives. Even though Russia does have an emergent ideology that lays heavy rhetoric on national distinctiveness, this argues less in cultural-historical than purely pragmatic terms, and is vague in the extreme. Although Medvedev’s liberalism is definitely questionable, the emergence of officially-endorsed liberal views that largely refute the rhetoric of sovereign democracy indicates that the national idea remains contested territory.\[14\]

This is not to say that Russia’s nationalism is a benign influence on the world arena. As Monaghan (2008) notes, Russia is moving from defensive reaction to Western initiatives to a more assertive position that at least potentially might act as an alternative ‘value centre’ to Western liberal democracy. Although Russia claims to share values with Europe, such as democracy, civil society, the rule of law and civic nationalism, it clearly defines their substance and priority rather differently (especially giving scant regard role to liberalism, individualism and human rights). Moreover, some members of the elite have clearly envisaged this difference in confrontational terms. For example, Sergei Karaganov sees Russia at the centre of a new competitive struggle between liberal-democratic and authoritarian models of capitalism that allegedly will determine the future of the world. The clash is certainly awkward, precisely because it is less about claiming to have different values than presenting alternative versions of the same values (Krastev 2007), and thus Russia and the West are perhaps doomed to talk past each other when they appear to be speaking the same language of democracy and capitalism. Yet, the likelihood that this will prove to be a fundamental existential challenge to the West rather than a profound source of friction is still rather remote, because although Moscow displays an increasing desire to establish Russia as an international role model, it is clearly hesitant to develop an ideological project that cuts itself off entirely from Western models or one that relies in any significant way on the discourse of civilisational nationalism it adopts in its domestic policy.

Nevertheless, it remains an open question as to whether Russia’s instrumental and inconsistent nationalism makes it a more problematic partner for the West than, for example, China, whose illiberal nationalism is relatively constant. In contrast, Russia oscillates between more co-operative and truculent positions, motivated by its desire to be a sovereign, semi-detached but equally respected part of Europe, with the need to play the gallery at home being apparently paramount.

\[14\] E.g. Demokratiya: Razvitie Rossiiskoi modeli (M: TsPT 2008).
That democratising nationalism is potentially more conflictual than that of consolidated authoritarian states is no news to theorists of nationalism, who have argued that an exclusionary nationalism allows semi-democratic elites ‘to rule in the name of the nation [without being] fully accountable to its people’ (Snyder 2000: 45). From this perspective, even if the Kremlin outlines a moderate, controlled nationalism that underpins its official doctrines, their persistent habits of exploiting less benign public phobias and complexes perhaps provides the basis for a ‘tide of populist nationalism’ (Shevstova 2007). As Sakwa notes, Russian popular anti-Americanism ebbs and flows, but after each ebb the residual level remains ratcheted up (Sakwa 2008a). Given the state’s control over organised political life in general, there is little short-term chance of a ‘red and brown’ revolution by nationalist movements that some Kremlin-connected individuals envisage if state vigilance lost its monopoly of the nationalist political agenda (Nikonov 2006), still less of a Weimar-style victory of extremists through the ballot box. Rather the imminent risk is either of localised and sporadic ethnic clashes prompted by these Kremlin-sponsored phobias, particularly in the context of growing economic distress, or of the gradual contamination of ‘official nationality’ by civilisational nationalism as the Kremlin responds to demands it has done much to create. The 2008 foreign policy doctrine, which for the first time indicated that ‘global competition is acquiring a civilisational dimension’ (Kontseptsiya 2008) indicated this process in train. The choice of the ‘liberal’ Medvedev as Russia’s new president was undoubtedly influenced by a number of hidden reasons, but indicates at least that the Kremlin still prefers a patina of Westernising pragmatism to more confrontational, even nationalist sentiments of alternatives such as Sergei Ivanov. Yet, unless the Kremlin more actively and consistently promulgates and defends the moderate, civic nationalism its official nationality ostensibly aspires to, ‘enlightened patriotism’ will remain much more an aspect of self-serving elite rhetoric than the daily cultural and political reality of Russia’s citizens.

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