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Nationality Policy: Russian Nation vs. Russian People?

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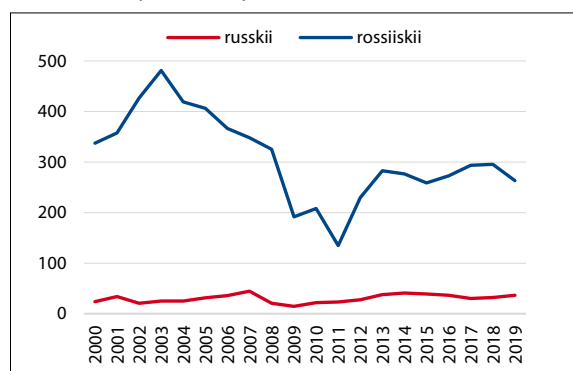
Abstract

In January 2020, President Putin initiated a major constitutional reform. One of the changes concerns the question of the national identity of Russia's multi-ethnic state and more specifically, the role of the ethnic Russians in the context of all peoples in the Federation. Article 68 of the constitution defines Russian as the official state language, but the new version adds as an explanation for this special status that Russian is the language of the "state-forming people." This noteworthy wording corroborates a development which has been going on for ten years. The changes include the concept of *Russkii Mir*, the idea of the multi-national nation of the "Russian Federation with an ethnic Russian cultural core" and the frequent use in official contexts of the phrase "ethnic Russian (*russkii*)" instead of "multi-national Russian (*rossiiskii*)."

Russkii, Rossiiskii

In Russian there are two adjectives whose meanings are close to each other and yet denote very different things: *russkii* and *rossiiskii*. Unfortunately, in English there is only one word for both concepts, Russian, so to make the distinctions between them clear, English texts tend to reproduce the two different Russian words. *Russkii* denotes the Russian people in an ethnic-national sense, while *rossiiskii* has a civic dimension and refers to citizens of the Russian Federation who can be ethnic Russian or belong to any other group as well. The country's official name Russian Federation is *Rossiiskaia Federatsia* and denotes an administrative entity with 85 regions—including two that international law does not recognize: the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol.

Figure 1: Use of the Terms "russkii" and "rossiiskii" in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



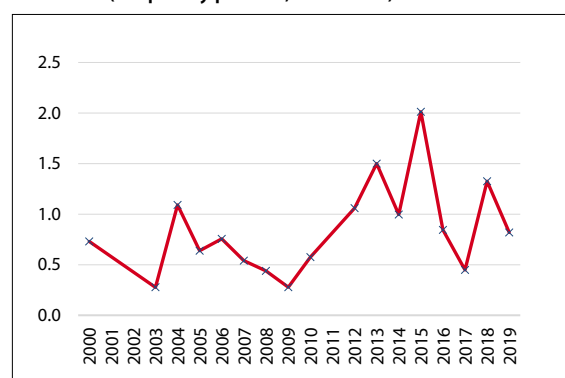
Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by *dekoder* (<https://putin.dekoder.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekoder.org/nationalitaeten>).

A Multi-national People

In 2016, in order to regulate the relationship of the state to the individual regions and their different ethnic

groups, Putin presented his concept of a "Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsia*) with a Russian cultural core (*Russkaia kultura*)." Putin's initiative was partly meant to check growing Russian nationalist tendencies in society. In contrast to the 1990s, however, ethnic-Russian nationalism in this conception no longer is considered to be a part of a supranational civic identity without any specific cultural content. Rather, the ethnic Russians are supposed to be the link holding together the fragile Russian (*Rossiiskii*) multi-ethnic state.

Figure 2: Use of the Term "mnogonatsionalnyi" (multi-national) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



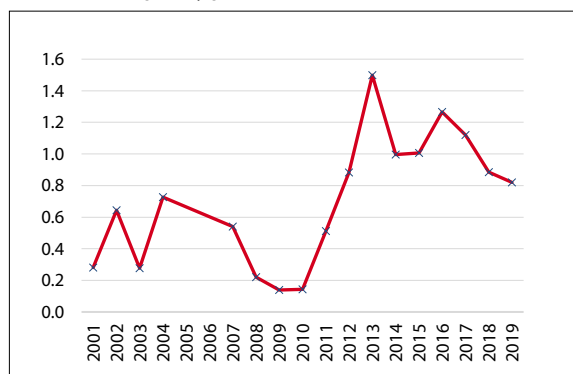
Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by *dekoder* (<https://putin.dekoder.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekoder.org/nationalitaeten>).

Nationality Policy

The Chechen war is probably the reason why "nationality policy" did not appear particularly prominent in Putin's speeches during the first two terms. Instead the president largely ignored the thorny issue. Only the official end of the war in 2009 and the emerging concept of *Russkii Mir*, Putin's attempt to exploit the ethnic Russians living outside of Russia to enhance the global position

of Russia, led to intense debates about the role of non-Russian nationalities in the federal state. Subsequently, in 2012, President Putin devoted one of his seven programmatic campaign articles to nationality politics, elevating the issue to much higher prominence.¹

Figure 3: Use of the Term “natsionalnaya politika” (nationality policy) in Presidential Statements 2001–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodek (<https://putin.dekodek.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodek.org/nationalitaeten>).

Rossiiskii Nation

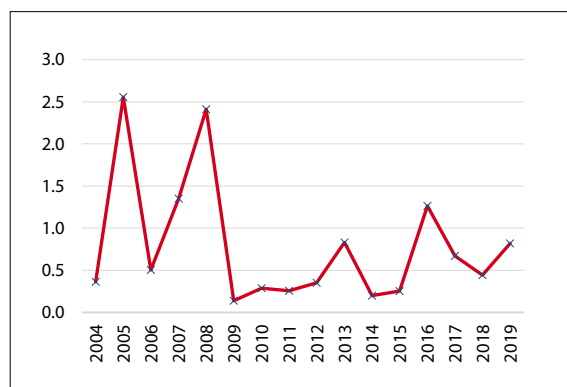
Putin did not begin to talk about the “Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsiya*) with a Russian cultural core (*Ruskaia kultura*)” until his second presidential term (2004–2008). He was concerned with safeguarding the Russian Federation from the fate of the Soviet Union, which had ultimately broken down along ethnic lines. However, Putin merely incorporated the state-building idea of the “Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsiya*) with a Russian cultural core (*Ruskaia kultura*)” into his public discourse, without giving the idea any particular prominence.

Then, in 2016, President Putin announced a “Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsiya*).” But he was not able to push the subject far. Some republics, in which ethnic Russians do not form a majority—notably Dagestan, Tatarstan, and Sakha (Yakutia)—did not see Putin’s idea as a supranational concept, but rather a threat to their own cultural foundations. As more and more powers were transferred from the regions to the center, they now feared ethnic Russian dominance.

Orthodoxy

The “*Russkii* cultural core” of the concept is closely linked to the Russian Orthodox Church. Orthodoxy is an important symbolic resource of power for the Kremlin. In the run-up to the Duma and presidential elections, campaign managers feed the topic prominently into the public discourse.

Figure 4: Use of the Term “rossiiskaya natsiya” in Presidential Statements 2004–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)

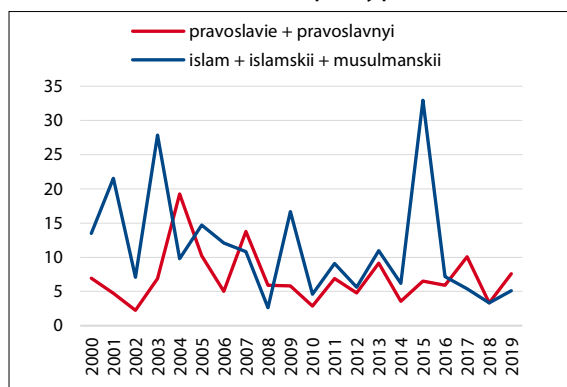


Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodek (<https://putin.dekodek.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodek.org/nationalitaeten>).

Orthodoxy, Islam

For the concept of the “Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsiya*)”, however, Islam is also of great importance. In part, it works to demonstrate a supposed superiority over Western Europe: Putin often highlights the fact that the Russian Federation has a much longer experience with the integration of Islam into society than the Western European states, which are overwhelmed by Muslim migration.

Figure 5: Use of the Terms “pravoslavie” (Orthodoxy) and “pravoslavnyi” (Orthodox) Compared to the Use of the Terms “islam” (Islam), “islamskii” (Islamic), and “musulmanskii” (Muslim) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



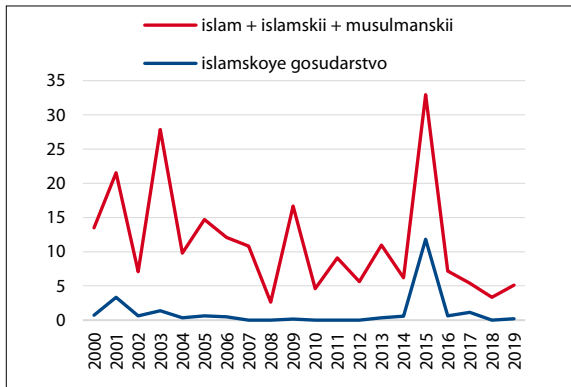
Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodek (<https://putin.dekodek.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodek.org/nationalitaeten>).

Islam, Islamic State

The interest in Islam in 2015 was mainly due to Russia’s military involvement in Syria, which is evident from the comparison with the Islamic State. The frequent

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

Figure 6: Use of the Terms “islam” (Islam), “islamskii” (Islamic), and “musulmanskii” (Muslim) Compared to the Use of the term “islamskoye gosudarstvo” (Islamic state) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodeer (<https://putin.dekodeer.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodeer.org/nationalitaeten>).

thematicization of Islam has to do with the intensified rhetoric of the “Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsia*),” in which not only many nations, but also religions coexist harmoniously.

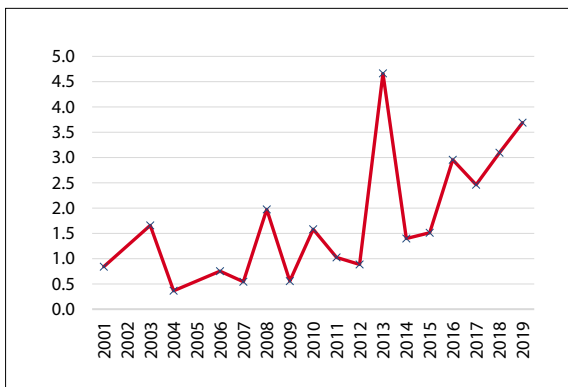
About the Author

Ulrich Schmid is professor of Russian studies at St. Gallen University.

A Note on the Data Analyzed by dekodeer

Within the context of the project “20 years of Putin”, dekodeer.org has developed a tool that “analyses texts from the official website of the President of Russia to generate a graphic representation of the frequency of word use by Putin (2000–2008 and 2012–2020) and Dmitry Medvedev (2008–2012). Researchers from European universities pick out individual terms and tell us the stories behind them” (<https://putin.dekodeer.org/words>). For further data and charts, see this URL and (in German) <https://putin.dekodeer.org/nationalitaeten>.

Figure 7: Use of the Term “identichnost” (identity) in Presidential Statements 2001–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodeer (<https://putin.dekodeer.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodeer.org/nationalitaeten>).

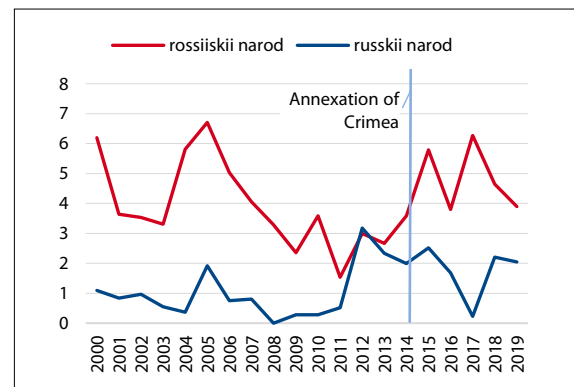
Identity

Closely intertwined with the concept of nationality is the theme of *identity*, which has seen a steady increase in the last twenty years.

Rossiiskii people, Russkii people

Almost throughout the Putin era, the politically correct term “*Rossiiskii* people” dominated, including all citizens of the Russian Federation, regardless of their ethnicity. In the course of the patriotic high spirits after the annexation of Crimea, however, the term “*Russkii*” is experiencing a renaissance again. The reason for this is the assumption of the historical pioneering role of the “*Russkii* people”: At a meeting of the Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights on 10 December 2019, Putin declared that the Russian people themselves were born from different peoples, mainly Slavic, but also Finno-Ugric.² According to this logic, Putin is to derive the integrative function of the “Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsia*)” from the role model of the Russian people (*Russkii narod*) which also unites and amalgamates heterogeneous ethnic groups.

Figure 8: Use of the Terms “rossiiskii narod” and “russkii narod” in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodeer (<https://putin.dekodeer.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodeer.org/nationalitaeten>).

2 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62285>