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4 **Russia's Ministry of Ambivalence: The Failure of Civic Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Russia**

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8
9
10 *Abstract*

11 This article argues that the sources of official and societal ambivalence towards civic nationhood
12 in today's Russia are found in the institutional instability and personalist dynamics of hybrid
13 regime politics in the 1990s. Successful civic nation-building should institutionalize inclusive
14 criteria for citizenship as a basis for policy-making, which in turn should create incentives for
15 dominant ethnicities to embrace civic nationhood. While the shifting views of Boris El'tsin on
16 nationalities policy and the constant turmoil in the government's nationalities ministry have
17 received little scholarly attention, they illuminate the endogenous sources of regime instability
18 in relation to civic nation-building. Russia's experience thus challenges the traditional view of
19 ethnic nationalism as fostering authoritarianism and civic nationalism as fostering democracy:
20 rather, competitive authoritarianism in the 1990s confounded the regime's own efforts in civic
21 nation-building and laid the groundwork for the 'ethnic turn' in Russian politics under Vladimir
22 Putin.
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26
27 *Keywords*

28 hybrid regimes, authoritarianism, nation-building, nationalism, Russia
29

30
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34 Stewart, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on earlier drafts. Any errors or
35 omissions are the author's own responsibility.
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40 Why did civic nation-building fail in post-Soviet Russia? Following the Soviet Union's collapse,
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42 Russia's new government declared its intent to democratize and embraced a civic nationality
43
44 defined by territory and citizenship, rather than an ethnic understanding of nationality as based
45
46 on language, culture, and kinship. Throughout the 1990s, Russian President Boris El'tsin
47
48 promoted the idea of civic nationhood and almost exclusively used the non-ethnic term for
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50 Russian (*rossiiskii* rather than *ruskii*).¹ Russia's federal system continued the Soviet-era
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52 practice of treating predominantly Russian regions as administrative-territorial (non-ethnic)
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59 _____
60 ¹ Both terms are confusingly translated into English as "Russian." For a historical overview of the uses of
61 "*ruskii*" and "*rossiiskii*," see Tishkov (2009).
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4 units while providing territorial recognition for minority ethnicities. The nationalities policy
5
6 concept adopted in 1996 characterized Russia as a multinational state while acknowledging the
7
8 unifying role played by ethnic Russians (Ukaz Prezidenta... 1996). Ethnic identification was soon
9
10 removed from citizens' internal passports, further weakening the link between ethnicity and
11
12 citizenship (Aktürk 2010).
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16 Despite these steps toward the formal institutionalization of civic nationality, the
17
18 Kremlin often equivocated in official articulations of the nation. While it adopted civic
19
20 understandings in domestic affairs, ethnic understandings of the nation persisted in relation to
21
22 Russian diaspora in neighboring states (Shevel 2011a). In their daily lives, Russians use civic and
23
24 ethnic terms interchangeably, though ethnic understandings of Russian (*russkii*) identity tend to
25
26 be cultural rather than political in common usage while civic expressions (*rossiiskii*) could be
27
28 taken as anti-ethnic (Rutland 2010). At other times, the civic expression is used to signal non-
29
30 Russian ethnicity (Miller 2009).
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35 In mass politics, the failure of civic nation-building is perhaps best exemplified by the
36
37 transformation of ethnic Russians as the country's dominant ethnicity into a significantly
38
39 aggrieved group. Anti-migrant sentiment rose steadily throughout the 2000s, with state
40
41 patriotism emerging as the main rubric for uniting statist and even opposition parties with
42
43 ethnic nationalists (Kolstø 2016a; Laruelle 2014; Popescu 2012). The annexation of Crimea in
44
45 2014, which President Vladimir Putin justified with reference to co-ethnicity and historical
46
47 injustice, appeared the culmination of these trends (Putin 2014). Some observers perceived a
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49 dramatic ethnicization of official discourse of the nation in the accompanying surge of
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51 patriotism (Teper 2016; Blakkisrud 2016).
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57 On the heels of these political developments, it is tempting to seek explanations for the
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59 'ethnic turn' in Russian politics in terms of the Kremlin's perceived need to bolster its legitimacy
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4 in the face of declining economic performance and rising protest sentiment (McFaul 2014). Yet
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6 the uses of official nationalism are often tactical and the Kremlin’s legitimacy-seeking shifts
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8 between claims about security and stability, civilizational belonging, international status, and
9
10 historical traditions. Seeking an explanation for the ‘ethnic turn’ potentially neglects the
11
12 underlying institutional conditions that enable such shifts in legitimacy-seeking – including the
13
14 activation of ethnic nationalism and other forms of legitimation – especially when they run
15
16 counter to civic nationality.
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21 This article argues that the sources of official and societal ambivalence towards civic
22
23 nationhood are to be found in the institutional instability and personalist dynamics of hybrid
24
25 regime politics in the 1990s. Observers frequently characterized Boris El’tsin’s regime as
26
27 democratizing and attributed its difficulties in civic nation-building to challenges by political
28
29 opponents in the midst of simultaneous political and economic transitions (Breslauer and Dale
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31 1997; Linz and Stepan 1996; Tolz 1998). However, these obstacles to civic nation-building faded
32
33 in the 2000s with the taming of opposition forces and growth of central state capacity, such that
34
35 one must look elsewhere to explain the ongoing ambivalence in state and society concerning
36
37 civic nation-building. Instead, the causes of failure in civic nation-building are more likely
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39 endogenous to hybrid regime dynamics, in which regime actors maintained a façade of formally
40
41 democratic institutions while informally preventing their consolidation to facilitate clientelistic
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43 politics. To the extent that civic nation-building became a casualty of clientelism under El’tsin,
44
45 Vladimir Putin inherited a malleable nationalities policy that allowed the Kremlin to re-define
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47 civic nationality to suit the regime’s purposes. In this sense, the ‘ethnic turn’ in Russian politics is
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49 not an endgame but just the latest in an ongoing series of legitimacy-seeking moves.
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56 The next section explores the concept of civic nation-building, focusing on the role of
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58 dominant ethnicities and the conditions under which they are likely to embrace civic nation-
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4 building: namely, the presence of stable and democratic institutions. The following section
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6 addresses the weakness of civic national identification in Russia, focusing on the gap between
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8 formally civic nation-building policies and informal social and political practices. A detailed
9
10 scrutiny of regime dynamics challenges the common perception of El'tsin as a champion of civic
11
12 nation-building, most significantly in the constant flux within the Ministry for Nationalities.² The
13
14 many institutional changes in the ministry charged with conceptualizing and managing
15
16 nationalities has received scant scholarly attention, though they are revealing of the
17
18 endogenous sources of regime instability and ambivalence in relation to civic nation-building.
19
20 Finally, the article considers the implications for legitimacy-seeking in Putin's regime, as well as
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22 the broader theoretical insights for understanding social identities as arising from regime
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24 dynamics and institutional instability.
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32 CIVIC NATION-BUILDING AND DOMINANT ETHNICITY

34 The notion of civic nation-building derives from the distinction between civic and ethnic nations,
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36 most commonly associated with Friedrich Meinecke's (2015 [1907]) differentiation of cultural
37
38 and political nations and Hans Kohn's (2005 [1948]) opposition of Western and Eastern
39
40 nationalisms. In Ernst Renan's (1994 [1882]) sense of the nation as an "everyday plebiscite,"
41
42 civic national boundaries coincide with citizenship, nationhood is territorial and state-oriented,
43
44 and national identity is chosen rather than coerced. Civic nations are claimed to be more
45
46 inclusive, tolerant, peaceful, and democratic than ethnically-defined nations (Spencer and
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48 Wollman 2005). If examined in terms of constitutional practice, civic nation-building tends to
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57 ² The term 'nationalities ministry' is used, here, as a catch-all for the government entity primarily
58 responsible for elaborating and overseeing nationalities policy. At various times its policy portfolio
59 included responsibility for inter-ethnic relations, migrants, Russian diaspora, and federal relations. The
60 actual entity changed status, names, and portfolios multiple times throughout the 1990s (see TABLE 1).
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4 mean privileging individual rights and ensuring opportunities for participation in the nation's
5
6 political life.³ By contrast, the boundaries of ethnic nations are demotic and do not necessarily
7
8 correspond with citizenship (A. D. Smith 1988). Instead, nationhood is derived from culture and
9
10 perceived common descent rather than citizenship and the state (Connor 1993). Ethnic nations
11
12 are thus claimed to be exclusive and intolerant in practice, with the implication that ethnic
13
14 nation-states tend towards violence and authoritarianism (Greenfeld 1997; Ignatieff 1993).
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18 The civic/ethnic distinction is pervasive in scholarly and policy debates, though it
19
20 remains equally controversial in academic studies. Historically, the organization of peoples into
21
22 civic nations may reflect pre-political communal loyalties that involve neither choice nor
23
24 democracy (Marx 2003). In this sense, critics argue that the civic nation is no less a myth (and no
25
26 less cultural) than the ethnic nations claimed by nationalists (Yack 1996). Cheng Chen (2007, 28-
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28 7) argues that the concepts are so closely connected that various manifestations of nationalism
29
30 are better understood within major political traditions like liberalism or Leninism. Will Kymlicka
31
32 (2001, 247) further takes issue with the perception that civic nations are tolerant and peaceful,
33
34 noting that nationalist conflict may arise from attempts to assimilate national minorities into
35
36 civic nations. Some even suggest that the civic/ethnic distinction may reflect the ethnocentrism
37
38 of those advancing it (Brubaker 2004, 136–144).
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44 Acknowledging these theoretical challenges, Lowell Barrington (2006) argues that the
45
46 civic/ethnic distinction remains useful from an analytical perspective as ideal types that serve
47
48 prescriptive or diagnostic purposes. In a similar vein, Edward Koning (2011) holds that the
49
50 distinction remains useful for categorizing and classifying nation-building *policies* even if it is a
51
52 blunt and misleading tool for characterizing nations. If treated in this fashion, one may avoid
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58 ³ Greenfeld (1992, 11) acknowledges that one may also find “collectivistic-authoritarian” forms of civic
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60 nationalism, noting that “more often, though, collectivistic nationalism takes on the form of ethnic
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62 particularism, while ethnic nationalism is necessarily collectivistic.”
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4 making reductionist claims about national identity, or suggesting that the success or failure of
5
6 civic nation-building makes everyone either a citizen or an ethno-nationalist. Rather, the
7
8 distinction generally is taken to refer to a nation's membership criteria as ranging between
9
10 inclusive (civic) and exclusive (ethnic) extremes. One may further distinguish between *formal*
11
12 *policies* and *informal practices* concerning membership criteria, recognizing that official policies
13
14 may differ substantially from the informal, quotidian practices of state and societal actors.
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18 From a policy perspective, then, successful civic nation-building should institutionalize
19
20 inclusive criteria for citizenship that supplant ethnicity as a basis for policy-making, which in turn
21
22 should create incentives for ethnic majorities to embrace civic nationality as a salient and
23
24 meaningful category of identification. While ordinarily it is difficult to determine the direction of
25
26 causality between formal policy and informal practices, the correspondence of regime change
27
28 with the creation of a new, civic nationality means that one should see the impact of policies in
29
30 terms of everyday identification with civic nationality in post-Soviet Russia. Conversely, if civic
31
32 identification is weak – either compared with other social identities within Russia, or compared
33
34 with civic identification in other civic nations – then one should seek explanations in terms of
35
36 the policy environment and process.
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42 The role of dominant ethnicities is particularly worth stressing as critiques of civic
43
44 nation-building tend to focus on the consequences for ethnic minorities. By contrast, research
45
46 on dominant ethnicity represents “relatively uncharted territory, a vast field of inquiry which
47
48 has been bypassed by the legions of scholars armed with conventional citizenship studies,
49
50 nationalism and ethnic politics paradigms.” (Kaufmann and Zimmer 2004, 67) In theory,
51
52 demographically and culturally dominant ethnicities ought to benefit from civic nation-building
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54 insofar as their interests presumptively dominate political institutions regardless of whether
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56 rights are bound to individuals or groups. Internationally, the capture of the modern state by a
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4 dominant ethnic group usually appears as “a perfectly legitimate form of representing ‘the
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7 people’ by its elite” such that even the use of the term “ethnic” tends to be associated with
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9 minorities (Wimmer 2004, 35). In domestic politics, dominant ethnicities tend to associate their
10
11 values and interests with civic or universal values – a discursive tactic that makes the articulation
12
13 of minority ethnic interests appear particularistic and even extremist. Hence, the ongoing
14
15 commitment of ethnic majorities to a political system that ensures their cultural and political
16
17 domination tends to be taken for granted.
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19

20
21 In the 25 years since the initiation of civic nation-building in Russia, survey data and
22
23 qualitative field research suggest the result is ongoing societal ambivalence and possibly even a
24
25 reverse ethnicizing process. The widely cited World Values Survey in 2011 (Inglehart et al. 2014)
26
27 seemingly found powerful support for civic national identification, with 64% of Russian
28
29 respondents strongly agreeing that they felt themselves to be *rossiyane* – a response that was
30
31 stronger than even in countries traditionally identified as civic nations like the United States or
32
33 Spain.⁴ However, this identification was made without reference to any other social identity,
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35 such that one should be cautious in drawing conclusions about the intensity or salience of civic
36
37 identification. Indeed, only 29% indicated that they were “very proud” of being *rossiyane* –
38
39 substantially lower than Spain or the United States (See FIGURE 1). Drobizheva’s (2017) research
40
41 confirms that civic national identification is weak relative to other social identities: Russians
42
43 most frequently feel a sense of unity with their generational cohorts, professional cohorts, and
44
45 with co-ethnics, while unity on the basis of citizenship lags behind income or place of residence
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47 (see FIGURE 2). These findings resonate with recent qualitative research. In more than 60 in-
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58 ⁴ It may be worth noting that the question’s wording differed significantly for other countries, potentially
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60 producing radically different interpretations for respondents. For instance, the same question was
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62 phrased in the United States survey as, “I see myself as part of the United States” rather than “I feel
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64 myself to be an American.”
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4 depth interviews conducted by the author with a variety of Russian citizens in 2014-2016, a
5
6 constant refrain among respondents was that citizenship is a purely legal category lacking any
7
8 corresponding normative dimension or social significance (Goode 2018).⁵
9

10
11 Survey data from the Levada Center (2018) potentially even suggests an opposite trend
12
13 in relation to ethnic Russian identification, with assessments of ethnic Russians as a great nation
14
15 rising significantly by the end of the 1990s (and more slowly since the 2000s) while views of
16
17 Russians as a nation “like any other” fell (see FIGURE 3). One also finds that anti-migrant
18
19 sentiment grew throughout the 2000s and has remained high despite some fluctuation since
20
21 2012 (see FIGURE 4). In probing the sources of intolerance, Alexseev (2010, 96) observes that
22
23 ethnic Russians were “consistently more hostile and less tolerant toward migrants than ethnic
24
25 non-Russians.” However, he discovers that titular ethnic minorities are more hostile towards
26
27 migrants than non-titular minorities, suggesting that anti-migrant sentiment is driven by social
28
29 dominance and political status. Herrera and Kraus (2016) also find a link between socially
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31 dominant ethnicity and xenophobia.
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37 This process of ethnicization extends even to the state census. Russia’s 2002 census
38
39 included a write-in box for respondents to indicate their nationality, but 66% of respondents
40
41 had difficulty with the concept of nationality in test runs and were prone to confuse questions of
42
43 citizenship with ethnicity, answering, “I already said – I’m *russkii*.” In the same vein, 65-75% of
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45 census-takers believed that it was possible for respondents to answer the question of
46
47 nationality incorrectly (Stepanov 2003, 42–44). In the following 2010 census, a former census-
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49 taker recalled that, “a lot of people insisted, “write that I am Russian [*russkii*],” even though it
50
51 was obvious from...their name and appearance that they could not be ethnic Russian. That is to
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59 ⁵ This fieldwork was sponsored by a Fulbright Research Grant in 2014-2016. I am grateful to Ekaterina
60 Semushkina and Valeriya Umanets for their research assistance.
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4 say, ethnic Russian [*ruskii*] and Russian citizen [*rossiyanin*] are blurring together.”⁶ In this sense,
5
6 the formal replacement of the dominant ethnonym with civic nationality has not been
7
8 particularly successful in practice. While the criteria for obtaining citizenship (or, for
9
10 membership in the nation) do not depend on ethnicity in terms of policy, ethnic identification
11
12 not only remains salient but even threatens to ethnicize civic nationality in daily life.
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18 HYBRID REGIME DYNAMICS AND CIVIC NATION-BUILDING

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20 From a formal institutional standpoint, Russia’s policies concerning citizenship, immigration, and
21
22 federalism encourage civic nation-building. The 1993 constitution guarantees the equality of
23
24 Russian citizens regardless of ethnicity or religion. Russian (*rossiiskii*) citizenship and the name of
25
26 the Russian Federation (*Rossiskaya Federatsiya*) are clearly distinct from the Russian ethnonym
27
28 (*ruskii*). While any citizen may form or participate in a political party, parties are required to
29
30 have members in at least half of Russia’s regions and ethnic parties are banned. Immigration
31
32 policy in the 1990s was similarly inclusive, particularly in offering Russian citizenship to anyone
33
34 formerly bearing Soviet citizenship. As a regional hegemon and economic power in the post-
35
36 Soviet sphere, Russia quickly became a default destination for displaced peoples and later for
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38 migrant labor (Malakhov 2014), making it “one of the most open countries in the world both in
39
40 terms of emigration and immigration.” (Ioffe and Zayonchkovskaya 2010, 120)
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47 The constitution also acknowledges that Russia is a multi-national state and provides
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49 ethno-federal accommodation for significant minority ethnicities. The federal system further
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51 divides the ethnic Russian population among 57 regions (out of 89 total regions in 1993).⁷ If one
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56 ⁶ Author’s interview, Perm’, November 26, 2015.

57 ⁷ In examining the survival of ethnofederal systems, Henry Hale (2004) argues that the presence of a core
58 ethnic region not only promotes the breakdown of authority between central state and ethnic regions,
59 but also suggests a plausible, exclusionist alternative to statehood for dominant ethnicities (which also
60 enhances threat perceptions among ethnic minorities). The absence of a core ethnic region may thus be
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4 includes Crimea and Sevastopol, the number of these regions today is 59. Attempts to merge
5
6 some ethnic and administrative-territorial regions in the 2000s slightly reduced the number of
7
8 ethno-federal regions, while the overall effect of such mergers and other federal reforms in the
9
10 context of Putin's centralization of power was to encourage the perception of the Russian
11
12 Federation as an increasingly homogeneous cultural and political space (Goode 2011;
13
14 Sharafutdinova 2013).

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18 By connecting rights and protections to an inclusive definition of citizenship, the state
19
20 appeared to incentivize civic nationality without forcing ethnic Russians to choose between civic
21
22 and ethnic identities. What, then, accounts for the popular ambivalence and ethnicization of
23
24 civic national identity? Returning to the distinction between formal institutions and informal
25
26 practices concerning the criteria for membership in the nation, a significant factor contributing
27
28 to ethnic majorities' acceptance of civic nation-building is the presence of *stable* and *democratic*
29
30 institutions to ensure consistent representation and protection of dominant ethnic interests
31
32 regardless of parties or individuals in power. Stable constitutional rules are essential for
33
34 cultivating a sense of civic nationhood, otherwise civic national projects are unlikely to resonate
35
36 either with elites or the broader population. As Rutland (2010, 122) wryly observes, "a civic
37
38 national identity that is dictated from above is arguably a contradiction in terms." Yet Claus Offe
39
40 (1991, 516) notes that a crucial issue in postcommunist transitions is "the absence of a fixed set
41
42 of trustworthy or at least uncontested social facts and binding institutions," such that all politics
43
44 becomes contingent. For elites in post-communist Russia, the determination (or non-
45
46 determination) of those rules for becoming national must therefore be understood as tactical in
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56 considered a minimal formal necessity to ensure that ethnic majorities do not reject a civic national
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58 project in favor of an ethnically-defined nation. This was successful to the extent that Russian regions
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60 proved unwieldy as a basis for political mobilization against the state in the 1990s, as witnessed by the
61
62 failed attempt to create an Urals Republic (Herrera 2005) or the inability of inter-regional associations like
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64 Siberian Accord (*sibirskoe soglashenie*) to succeed as political platforms (Hughes 1994).
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4 relation to establishing formal and informal constitutional rules and managing economic re-
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6 distribution in the course of regime transition.
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8
9 Offe's observation foreshadowed the combination of informal politics and formal
10 institutional facades prevailing in the hybrid regimes of post-communist Eurasia. While
11 democratizing states strengthen formal constitutional rules over time, competitive authoritarian
12 regimes subvert them to preserve power while no individual actor is powerful enough to
13 monopolize politics (Hale 2014; Levitsky and Way 2010). Unlike democratizing regimes, then,
14 the political dynamics of hybrid regimes mitigate the potential for civic nation-building by
15 undermining rather than consolidating the formal institutional order. As politics become more
16 autocratic and elite-oriented, informal networks become more meaningful for ethnic minorities
17 who, in turn, have fewer incentives to participate in formal institutions that do not provide
18 protection from domination by core ethnicities. By the same token, dominant ethnicities have
19 fewer incentives to press for reform of malfunctioning institutions and settle instead for 'bad
20 enough' governance (Melville and Mironyuk 2016).
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37 In this vein, civic nation-building was not so much a casualty of conflicts between center
38 and regions or the Kremlin and opposition parties, but the tactical uses and re-definition Russian
39 nationality in *intra-regime* conflicts. Alena Ledeneva (2006) documents in the case of El'tsin's
40 Russia how personalist networks and informal elite practices simultaneously sustained and
41 undermined formal institutions. Russia's first Nationalities Minister Valerii Tishkov (1997, 63)
42 observed that El'tsin was more of a pragmatist than scholar in dealing with nationalities issues.
43
44 The following section investigates how this pragmatism and his intuitive sense of Russian
45 exceptionalism came to be reflected in the constant turmoil in the government's nationalities
46 ministry and the gradual absorption of its portfolio (and staff) into the Presidential
47 Administration. In turn, as nationalities policy-making became increasingly 'presidential,' it
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4 placed greater emphasis on the needs and concerns of ethnic Russians. The consequences were
5
6 two-fold: civic nationality failed to become a meaningful social identity among ordinary
7
8 Russians; and in elite circles, the pragmatic approach to civic nation-building left El'tsin's
9
10 successor unconstrained in appropriating Soviet-era symbols and opposition nationalist
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12 demands, abolishing the nationalities ministry, and advancing patriotic justifications for
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14 autocratization and irredentism.
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21 EL'TSIN'S IDENTITY POLITICS AND RUSSIA'S NATIONALITIES MINISTRY⁸

22
23 El'tsin is commonly portrayed as a staunch defender of a civic or territorial definition of
24
25 nationality despite domestic opposition. Yet he devoted little attention to national identity in his
26
27 memoirs compared to his political rivals, focusing instead on political struggles and his rise to
28
29 power (Tolz 1998). His understanding of Russian national identity was instinctive rather than
30
31 deliberative or explicit. Class, positions in power structures, and available resources rather than
32
33 nationality defined actors in his oeuvre. In fact, El'tsin's campaigning on national identity issues
34
35 in 1990 was so uncharacteristic that it was viewed as a cynical power-seeking move in Mikhail
36
37 Gorbachev's camp, with Party secretary Vadim Medvedev complaining that, "he has become a
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39 Russian patriot, although he never gave a thought to Russia until now" (Colton 2008, 184).
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44 From the start, El'tsin's commitment to civic nation-building was mixed with appeals to
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46 Russian exceptionalism – that is, the notion that Russia operates in accordance with its own,
47
48 unique rules and occupies a privileged role in international history and world affairs. While
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50 exceptionalism is distinct from ethnic nationalism, they blend together when the source of
51
52 uniqueness is claimed in ethno-cultural terms. Writing on the heels of the October 1993 crisis
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59 ⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all press references in the following sections were located using the *Integrum*
60 full-text database.
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4 with parliament, El'tsin wrote, "Besides democratic guarantees and the correct international
5 policy, [Russia] needs decency and discipline from its citizens. This is not the American model...
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9 Russia's special nature has made itself felt in the last two years in all its entirety. We have only
10 to listen to it carefully. And then everything will be right." (Yeltsin 1994, 175–176) His 1994
11 address to parliament exhibited this mix of Russian exceptionalism and national mythologizing,
12
13 introducing the concept of "co-citizenship" [*sograzhdanstvo*] to reconcile the contradiction
14 between the ethnic and administrative principles of governance in Russia's federal system. In
15 this vein, he chastised leaders of ethnic republics for cultivating a sense of identity and even
16 citizenship separate from Russian [*rossiiskii*] citizenship, complaining that, "it is unconstitutional
17 and therefore unacceptable to divide people as 'native' or 'non-native' nationalities." At the
18 same time, he lavished attention on ethnic Russians as a state-bearing people:
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30 The protection and strengthening of the federal government directly depends upon the
31 national disposition [*samochnuvstvie*] of [ethnic] Russians. ...Russians comprise an
32 absolute majority of the population - 83%. They are not threatened by assimilation,
33 neglect of native language, or loss of national traditions. At the same time, it is
34 impossible to discount a range of problems that Russians encounter, especially in
35 certain republics of the Federation and in areas that border conflict zones (El'tsin 1994).
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44 In this fashion, El'tsin framed ethnic Russians as secure and dominant within the Russian state,
45 but simultaneously as victims of ethnocratic republics and as refugees from neighboring conflict
46 zones.
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51 El'tsin's contradictory approach to civic nationality found its political expression in the
52 near-constant turmoil surrounding his government's nationalities ministry. In the midst of
53 transition from Soviet rule, the State Committee on Nationalities Policy was created in 1991.
54 Initially the Committee was put under the leadership of Gennadii Burbulis and Sergei Shakhrai,
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4 then the academic Valerii Tishkov of the Institute for Anthropology and Ethnography was
5
6 appointed to lead the Committee in 1992. Tishkov was a firm advocate of civic nation-building
7
8 and argued for doing away with Soviet-era categories of multinationality [*mnogonarodnost'*] and
9
10 ethnicity [*etnos*]. His draft nationalities concept paper in 1992 recognized “the individual’s right
11
12 to choose his or her own cultural identity and to have his or her interests and needs translated
13
14 into reality.” (Batyrrshin 1992a) At the same time, the draft concept acknowledged the right of
15
16 self-government and called for implementing the 1992 Federation Treaty.⁹ With respect to the
17
18 ethnic Russian population, the concept devoted substantial attention to the need for improving
19
20 living conditions in predominantly Russian regions and “the revival of the culture of the Russian
21
22 people,” though it also warned that the dominant ethnicity should not be allowed to stunt the
23
24 development of indigenous peoples by usurping economic resources.
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30 From the start, Tishkov was frustrated by the persistence of Soviet-era nationalities
31
32 policy. In one illustrative moment, he recalls El'tsin asking, “Should we allocate more resources
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34 and support for any one of the republics in North Caucasus, say Dagestan, so as to make it a kind
35
36 of stronghold in the region?” Yet at other times he indicated a desire for a “scientific basis” for
37
38 nationalities policy, with the result being that neither was achieved (Tishkov 1997, 63–67). He
39
40 was further frustrated by bureaucratic duplication, the predominance of personal ties, and
41
42 policy incoherence – a common feature of El'tsin-era politics and generally of post-Soviet hybrid
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44 regimes:
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55 ⁹ The Federation Treaty, signed on 14 March 1992, formalized the preservation of Russia’s ethno-federal
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57 system following the Soviet Union’s collapse. The Treaty granted significant concurrent powers to the
58
59 ethnic republics alongside the federal government and guaranteed their (over-)representation in the
60
61 federal parliament. (Kahn 2002, 126–132) After the October 1993 constitutional crisis, the new
62
63 constitution adopted in December 1993 preserved much of the Federation Treaty but significantly scaled
64
65 back the republics’ reserved and concurrent powers.

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4 In policy-making today, political improvisation prevails. Every person at the top has his
5
6 own nationalities policy. I realize that the President is one thing, but when, for example,
7
8 the Vice-President has his own style in this sphere. The same can be said about the
9
10 institution of presidential aides and advisers, who also have their own "national"
11
12 sympathies. (Batyrrshin 1992b)
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15
16 Tishkov's draft nationalities concept proposed transforming the State Committee on
17
18 Nationalities Policy into a "superministry" featuring a system of representatives throughout
19
20 Russia, bearing the power to review all decisions by federal agencies affecting nationalities
21
22 policy and whose acts would be binding on all regional governments. The proposal was political
23
24 over-reach and it doomed Tishkov politically. After resigning, he recommended Shakhrai as his
25
26 successor. As one commentator observed, it was the first time that El'tsin followed the advice of
27
28 his "powerless and unknown" minister (Kuznetsova 1992).
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32
33 In serving simultaneously as deputy Prime Minister and head of the State Committee,
34
35 Shakhrai brought a measure of political authority that the office lacked under Tishkov. His 11-
36
37 point nationalities policy emphasized federalism, de-politicization of nationalities policy,
38
39 peaceful conflict resolution, deferral to elected bodies "whether the center likes them or not",
40
41 and the "indivisibility of economic policy." However, Shakhrai viewed discord among central
42
43 authorities as the main threat to Russia's territorial integrity (Rodin 1993). Emblematic of the
44
45 divisions within government was that the State Committee, parliament, and government
46
47 structures held conferences and roundtables with regional leaders at the same time that the
48
49 Ministry of Internal Affairs assessed them as threats to the country's stability (Pestrukhina
50
51 1993).
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57 The committee was re-named in 1993 to the State Committee on Federation and
58
59 Nationalities Policy, reflecting a preference for filtering nationalities issues through federal
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4 institutions. At the same time, Shakhrai explained that asymmetrical (ethno-federal) federalism
5
6 was a legacy of Soviet-era understandings of federalism in terms of “capacity to resolve the
7
8 nationalities question.” (Shakhrai 1993) He argued that this older approach contradicted the
9
10 new form of federalism practiced in post-Soviet Russia, and that it should be viewed as a
11
12 transitional mechanism while national-cultural autonomy could serve as a means to provide
13
14 minority ethnic groups with recognition without risking separatism. At the same time, Shakhrai
15
16 criticized the government for providing the State Committee with insufficient resources. His
17
18 response was to found the Party of Russian Unity and Accord (PRES), which he envisioned as a
19
20 “party of the regions” to cooperate with the government, adopting the slogan “family, property,
21
22 Motherland.” (Batyrsin 1993)
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28 In 1994, the committee merged with the State-Committee on Socio-Economic
29
30 Development of the North and became a full-fledged Ministry of Nationality Affairs and Regional
31
32 Policy. Shakhrai remained minister, but he was even less effusive about civic nation-building. His
33
34 supporters were openly critical of El’tsin’s concept of “co-citizenship” (and even more critical of
35
36 El’tsin’s lack of support for the new Ministry). In a scathing critique of El’tsin, Roman
37
38 Abdulatipov (1995) complained of the lack of a coherent state nationalities policy: “We still have
39
40 not shown the peoples of Russia the national ideas, the attractive policies, economics, values, or
41
42 leaders around which they are supposed to unite. This is a very dangerous situation.”
43
44 Specifically, the danger was that “some actors in the center spread wild opinions that [ethnic]
45
46 Russians do not have statehood,” and that this could always be used to inflame inter-ethnic
47
48 hostility as long as state nationalities policy remained undefined. Pushing back on the civic
49
50 national project, Abdulatipov defended ethnic understandings of nationality in the name of
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52 ethnic Russians combined with an anti-Western complaint that, “The national spirit, culture, and
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54 traditions are under the control of Western cultural exports.” (Abdulatipov 1995)
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4 Growing tensions over control of regional policy and duplication of government
5
6 functions by the Presidential Administration led to Shakhrai's dismissal in May 1994 (Kutsyllo
7
8 1994; Sigal 1994). His departure accompanied the replacement of his supporters in the Ministry
9
10 including Abdulatipov and Aleksandr Kotenkov, while Shakhrai was brought into the Presidential
11
12 Administration to head the Presidential Council for Cadres Policy. However, he retained the post
13
14 of Deputy Prime Minister with responsibility for nationalities, regional, and legal policy,
15
16 effectively ensuring future conflict with his successor in the nationalities ministry (Kuznets 1994;
17
18 Parkhomenko 1994).
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23 By the mid-1990s, El'tsin began to resist expressions of non-Russian ethnicity in relation
24
25 to political rights while promoting the cause of ethnic Russians as victims within their own state.
26
27 He began to distance himself from radical democrats and burnished his Russian national
28
29 credentials in the summer of 1994 (on the anniversary of Russia's declaration of sovereignty) by
30
31 visiting the head of the Russian Orthodox Church Aleksei II, nationalist writer Alexander
32
33 Solzhenitsyn, and attending an exhibit by national artist Il'ya Glazunov (Tishkov 1997, 239). The
34
35 war in Chechnya dominated (unsurprisingly) El'tsin's address to parliament in 1995. In
36
37 addressing the problem of the Russian diaspora, El'tsin used the blanket term "compatriots"
38
39 [*sootchestvenniki*] to refer to both Russian citizens abroad and ethnic diaspora—a term favored
40
41 by opponents of the civic nation-building within El'tsin's regime. More subtly, El'tsin's speech
42
43 demonstrated the beginning of creeping centralization of nationalities policy: if his 1994 address
44
45 emphasized the central role of civil society for the realization of national identities, the 1995
46
47 speech described this as a governmental role.¹⁰
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59 ¹⁰ "The task of government is to help representatives of all peoples to formulate their own interests and
60 to realize their responsibility within a united multinational society." (El'tsin 1995)
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4 In the nationalities ministry, Shakhrai's replacement was the former Governor of
5
6 Krasnodar Krai Nikolai Egorov. Egorov's appointment appeared to be El'tsin's first decisive step
7
8 away from the civic national project. He earned a reputation in Krasnodar by refusing (along
9
10 with Moscow's Yurii Luzhkov) to eliminate the local residency permit [*propisk*] system,
11
12 discouraging migration from the South, and developing a "common language" with local
13
14 Cossacks. He supported Abkhazia in its war with Georgia and, along with his deputy, Vadim
15
16 Pechenev, became known as a "great power" ideologue (Sigal 1994; Vyzhutovich 1996).
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20
21 Chechnya also dominated Egorov's tenure as Nationalities Minister – indeed, he was
22
23 forced to resign in June 1995 in the wake of the Budenovsk crisis¹¹ and parliament's threat of a
24
25 vote of no confidence in the government (Volkov 1995). He quickly moved into the Kremlin,
26
27 becoming Presidential Advisor on regional and nationalities policy in August 1995 (Kostochkina
28
29 1995) and then Head of the Presidential Administration in January 1996. According to Russia's
30
31 long-serving human rights ombudsman, Sergei Kovalev, Egorov's rise meant that the
32
33 discriminatory nationalities policies developed in Krasnodar (favoring Cossacks, Russians, and
34
35 Slavs, while aggressive towards refugees and migrants from the Caucasus and Meskhetian
36
37 Turks) had come to the federal level (Tsanava 1998).
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41
42 The 1995-6 period was dominated by the national electoral cycle and El'tsin's struggle to
43
44 stay in power. During this time, he energetically promoted the Union of Russia and Belarus,
45
46 believing that most voters held to some mix of neo-Soviet and ethnic Russian identities (Tolz
47
48 2001, 256). Following his re-election, El'tsin unveiled a competition to define a new Russian
49
50 "national idea" in July 1996, though the outcome was an uninspiring series of essays supportive
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57 ¹¹ On June 14, 1995, Chechen separatists led by Shamil Basaev launched an attack on neighboring
58 Stavropol krai and then took entire hospital hostage. Russian authorities launched three failed assaults to
59 free the hospital, resulting in many civilian casualties. The authorities were forced to agree to a ceasefire
60 that allowed Basaev to return to Chechnya safely.
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4 of state patriotism in the government’s newspaper *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* (K. E. Smith 2002; Tolz
5
6 2001). Meanwhile, Vyacheslav Mikhailov was appointed Egorov’s successor as nationalities
7
8 minister. Mikhailov previously served as vice-chairman of the State Committee under Shakhrai,
9
10 rising to First Deputy Minister under Egorov (Sokolova 1995). The Ministry was re-named once
11
12 more in 1996 as the Ministry for Nationality Affairs and Federal Relations.
13
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15
16 Mikhailov’s chief accomplishment was to oversee the completion of the Concept of
17
18 State Nationalities Policy. The preamble of the State Nationalities Concept adopted in June 1996
19
20 demonstrated a striking continuity with El’tsin’s earlier expression of the foundational role
21
22 played by the ethnic Russian population:
23

24
25 The country’s dominant majority peoples for centuries formed an ethnic community,
26
27 and in this sense, they are native peoples that played a historical role in the establishing
28
29 of Russian statehood. The unique unity, variety, spiritual community, and union of
30
31 different peoples was preserved on the territory of Russia thanks to the unifying role
32
33 played by the [ethnic] Russian people (*Rossiiskaya Gazeta* 1996).
34
35

36
37 The Concept further stated that, “Inter-ethnic relations in the country to a great extent are
38
39 determined by the national disposition of the [ethnic] Russian people, which is the foundation of
40
41 Russian statehood.” The problems faced by other peoples were lumped together as bearing
42
43 “equal significance” that should be addressed by “adequate representation of all peoples” in
44
45 federal, regional, and local government. In addressing the issue of the Russian diaspora, the
46
47 Concept even invoked a nonsensical category of “ethnic *Rossiiane*.”¹²
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51 Commenting on the content of the Concept, Mikhailov drew particular attention to the
52
53 status and concerns of ethnic Russians:
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¹² See also discussion in Malakhov (2008).
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4 In the center of attention of Russian society today is the problem of the Russian people
5
6 [*ruskii narod*], the largest state-bearing nation in the country. ...the general situation in
7
8 Russia, including the area of inter-ethnic relations, greatly depends on the disposition of
9
10 the Russian people. And here there are many problems that cause alarm. ...The
11
12 objective demands for the development of the Russian people should be fully reflected
13
14 in statewide and regional programs. In this sense, the Concept for State National Policy
15
16 does not set the interests of the Russian people against those of other peoples. It
17
18 stresses that Russians' problems should be resolved in the context of the renewal of the
19
20 national life of the Federation, and of corresponding foreign policy directed towards
21
22 strengthening Russia's ties with the CIS and Baltics. (Pliev 1996)
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28 Mikhailov stressed the centuries-long experience of tolerance and unity in Russia. In the
29
30 Concept and in Mikhailov's discussion, one clearly sees long-standing Soviet-era legacies
31
32 enacted in familiar tropes of a brotherhood of nations with ethnic Russian leadership. The direct
33
34 link drawn between nationalities policy and foreign policy similarly echoed policy repertoires of
35
36 the previous era. However, one could detect a subtle shift in policy towards the Russian
37
38 diaspora (still described as "compatriots"), expressed as concern for protecting their national-
39
40 cultural ways of life and spiritual ties with Russia rather than pursuing repatriation (Grankina
41
42 1996).
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47 A concrete step towards institutionalizing civic nationhood was El'tsin's decree of March
48
49 1997 abolishing the "fifth line" in internal passports that indicated citizens' ethnicity, despite
50
51 popular support for keeping ethnicity in internal passports and objections from powerful ethnic
52
53 republics (Aktürk 2010). Despite this success, El'tsin's concern for publicly defining a unifying
54
55 national idea diminished rapidly after his re-election and his annual addresses to parliament in
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57 1996-1998 made virtually no mention of nationality (El'tsin 1996; El'tsin 1997; El'tsin 1998). The
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4 hint of anti-Westernism layered into his earlier memoirs became much more pronounced,
5
6 growing in proportion to distress over NATO's expansion and its military intervention in the
7
8 Balkans. In his 1999 address, he excoriated "NATO aggressors" for their campaign in Serbia and
9
10 concluded by thoroughly mixing civic and ethnic nationalist appeals: "There is no need to think
11
12 up abstract national ideas. Our real national task, as precisely said by Solzhenitsyn, is to
13
14 safeguard the nation. After all Russia is not just territory or government. Russia is above all
15
16 people. ...Russians [*rossiyane*] created a great power. And the might of Russia grows with its
17
18 people." (El'tsin 1999)
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22
23 Just as nationalities policy became more presidential (and contradictory), the waning
24
25 years of El'tsin's presidency were not kind to the nationalities ministry. Mikhailov was forced to
26
27 resign along with the rest of Viktor Chernomyrdin's government in May 1998. The ministry was
28
29 re-branded the Ministry for Regional and Nationalities Policy, but locating a new minister proved
30
31 a difficult task. Mikhailov was appointed to the Presidential Security Council, continuing the
32
33 transfer of the nationalities portfolio to the Presidential Administration. In his wake, there were
34
35 few candidates anxious "to head an ideological ministry that has no real financial levers and no
36
37 significant influence." (Nagornykh 1998) Eventually, Evgenii Sapiro, former speaker of the Perm
38
39 regional Duma, was tapped for the position. He proved politically acceptable owing to his lack of
40
41 connections with existing lobbying groups in Moscow – in fact, he did not even bring any of his
42
43 team members with him from Perm' to Moscow. However, Sapiro lacked any practical
44
45 experience working with nationalities (Kholmskaya and Kamyshev 1998). Sapiro answered to
46
47 Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Khristenko, who made budgetary federalism and local self-
48
49 government priorities for the ministry. Nationalities policy took a backseat to economics as the
50
51 basis for center-regional relations, with the Ministry seeking to level-up the status of Russia's
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4 provinces to equal the ethnic republics (Karelin 1998a). Sapiro also began to dismantle the
5
6 Ministry's department for working with the Russian diaspora (Karelin 1998b).
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8

9 In short order, the Ministry was dissolved and split into a Ministry for Nationalities
10 Policy, led by Ramazan Abdulatipov (who previously criticized El'tsin's civic national project), and
11 a Ministry for Regional Policy, led by Valerii Kirpichnikov. Abdulatipov dismantled the Ministry's
12 department for Russian diaspora, dividing it into two directorates: one devoted to preparing
13 bureaucrats for work abroad instead of managing relations with Russian diaspora communities;
14 the other employed just nine specialists (previously there were 21), of whom only one had
15 experience in the area (Karelin 1998b).
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25 The following year, the Ministry for Regional Policy was dissolved and its powers re-
26 allocated to a new ministry on the basis of the Ministry for Nationalities Policy, now known as
27 the Ministry for Federation Affairs and Nationalities. The Ministry was once more led by
28 Mikhailov, who could not help but lament its pathetic condition:
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35 ...everything has come full circle and again, as concerns the Ministry itself, everything
36 starts from the beginning. Not entirely from scratch, no: the Nationalities Policy Concept
37 has been adopted, there are cadres from the two dissolved ministries, there is
38 groundwork. But even still, there is no reality to the Ministry for Federation Affairs and
39 Nationalities as an instrument for realizing policy for the Russian government. We have
40 to start from the beginning... (Zemlyanoi and Kasaev 1999)
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49 Mikhailov likely knew the Ministry's fate was already determined. He was replaced in 2000 by
50 the former ambassador to Azerbaijan, Aleksandr Blokhin.
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54 To sum up, there is ample evidence that El'tsin was never fully committed to a civic
55 nation-building project. While he insisted upon the use of *rossiiskii* rather than *ruskii* to
56 describe the nation, he also ethnicized the civic concept. Ethnic Russians were described early
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4 and often as the cornerstone of Russian statehood and their interests articulated in terms of all-
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6
7 state interests. He insisted on the priority of looking after the ethnic Russian diaspora beyond
8
9
10 Russia's borders early in his presidency. He maintained a belief in Russian exceptionalism as
11
12 binding regime and nation:

13
14 Russia is a country of moods and emotions. That's just the way we're constructed;
15
16 nothing can be done about it. In politics, these emotions and moods sometimes
17
18 intertwine in the most outlandish way. Suppose there is a person in power in Russia
19
20 who always provokes the harshest criticism and sometimes even anger. It is precisely
21
22 this leader who will automatically become a powerful political center and consolidate
23
24 the most diverse forces (Yeltsin 2000, 274).¹³
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26

27
28 In El'tsin's televised farewell address in 1999, he even connected national exceptionalism with
29
30 the vote for his successor: "I have always believed in the marvelous wisdom of Russians. For this
31
32 reason, I have no doubt what choice you will make at the end of March 2000." (El'tsin 2000) In
33
34 this manner, the relationship between nationality and regime became increasingly evident in
35
36 what Pain (2016) has termed the "imperial syndrome" in Russian nationalism, combining
37
38 elements of exceptionalism, defensive imperialism, and the political domination of ethnic
39
40 Russians.
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46 47 COMPARING REGIME EFFECTS ON CIVIC NATION-BUILDING

48
49 In total, from 1991 to 1999 there were eight different incarnations of Russia's nationalities
50
51 ministry and as many changes in its leadership (see TABLE 1). In the midst of this process, it was
52
53 also alleged that the central government became increasingly Russified as representation of
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58 ¹³ It is perhaps worth noting that El'tsin wrote these words in relation to his appointment of Evgenii
59 Primakov as Prime Minister. By contrast, he described his successor, Vladimir Putin, as a calming
60 influence.
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4 non-Russians dwindled in appointed offices. Tishkov reports that, “in 1996, no more than three
5
6 or four non-Russians remained among the 40 high-ranking administrators of the federal
7
8 government's apparatus.” According to the Ministry’s own accounting in 1997, the ethnic
9
10 makeup of its employees consisted of 334 Russians, 22 Ukrainians, 9 Chechens, 5 Belorussians, 7
11
12 Germans, 5 Tatars, 4 Ossetians, and 3 Azerbaijanis. (Tishkov 1997, 259; Tsagolov 1997)
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14
15
16 As the nationalities portfolio was absorbed into the Presidential Administration, the
17
18 Ministry became a dumping ground for cast-offs from other ministries and departments that
19
20 previously dealt with nationalities-related concerns (Kholmskaya and Kamyshev 1998). One of
21
22 Shakhrai’s deputies, Ismail Aliev, complained that the Ministry became “a kind of holding tank
23
24 into which they crammed... retired generals, deputies, and high-ranking bureaucrats, possessing
25
26 but a dim understanding of nationalities policy.” (Aliev 1998)
27
28

29
30 In a final flurry of re-organization under Putin, the ministry absorbed powers from the
31
32 Ministry for CIS Affairs, Federal Migration Service, and State Committee for the North, becoming
33
34 the Ministry for Federation Affairs, Nationality, and Migration Policy in 2000. In 2001, the
35
36 government’s “most useless ministry” was dissolved and its powers redistributed among the
37
38 Ministry for Internal Affairs (MVD) and the Ministry for Economic Policy and Development
39
40 (Airapetova 2001). Responsibility for nationalities was tasked to Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir
41
42 Zorin (minister without portfolio) until 2004, when it was effectively re-created as a department
43
44 within the new Ministry of Regional Development. After the latter’s dissolution in 2014, the
45
46 department was transferred to the Ministry of Culture until Putin announced the creation of a
47
48 Federal Agency for Nationality Affairs in 2015 (Ukaz Prezidenta... 2015).
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54 The popular ambivalence in relation to civic nationality bears a clear relationship with
55
56 El’tsin’s inability to articulate a convincing civic national identity and his recourse to Soviet-era
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4 ethnic tropes, Russian exceptionalism, and anti-Westernism.¹⁴ The push-pull relationship
5
6 between Yeltsin’s pragmatism in his identity politics and the constant reshuffling of the
7
8 nationalities ministry meant that no codified definition or unifying myth regarding the meaning
9
10 of Russian national identity (civic or ethnic) took root, aside from the definition of citizenship in
11
12 the 1993 constitution and the Soviet inheritance of ethno-linguistic and territorial nationality.
13
14 Today, Putin’s utilization of patriotic appeals represents a continuation of ambivalent nation-
15
16 building begun in the 1990s – itself a consequence of regime dynamics.
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21 While the nationalities ministry provides a useful case study, its travails were
22
23 symptomatic of regime dynamics. One also finds continual institutional reorganizations and
24
25 contradictory policy-making in immigration policy. Malakhov (2014, 1066) cites a particularly
26
27 illustrative moment in October 2001 that joined the fates of nationalities and immigration
28
29 policy, when Putin publicly called on ‘compatriots’ in former Soviet states to return to Russia
30
31 only to disband the responsible ministry five days later. In a detailed examination of Russia’s
32
33 immigration policy, Caress Schenk (2018) reveals that such legal and institutional zigzags are
34
35 means to creating shortages of legal migrant labor. In turn, the scarcity of legal labor serves as a
36
37 patronage resource for elites that undergirds a “multi-level balancing act of migration
38
39 management.” In this sense, the ambivalent and contradictory outcomes in nationalities and
40
41 immigration policies are symptomatic of Russia’s system of informal governance (Ledeneva
42
43 2013).
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49 The link between regime dynamics and nation-building outcomes is further suggested
50
51 by Ukraine’s post-Soviet experience, though the conditions for civic nation-building were rather
52
53 different. Ukraine’s 1996 constitution made explicit a civic definition of the nation, though
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58 ¹⁴ This is not to say that there is an inherent tie between ethnic tropes and anti-Westernism, particularly
59 as the latter may also be found in neo-imperial nationalism. Rather, this combination reflects the tactical
60 and evolving nature of Yeltsin’s nationalities policy. My thanks to Katie Stewart for this point.
61

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4 walked a finer line with respect to minority ethnicities and languages and especially with regard
5
6 to its 11 million ethnic Russians and the even larger community of Russophones (Wilson 2002,
7
8 205–211). While Ukraine avoided ethno-federalism, substantial portions of the country in the
9
10 East and South (including Crimea) were Russified and much of the country’s electoral history
11
12 came to be understood in terms of Western vs Eastern Ukraine. Beyond the Russian question,
13
14 Ukraine’s complicated historical and ethnic patchwork led to chronic scholarly debates about
15
16 the number of politically-salient cultural and linguistic regions, ranging from two to as many as
17
18 eight (L. Barrington and Faranda 2009; L. W. Barrington and Herron 2004; Birch 2000; O’Loughlin
19
20 2001; Katchanovski 2006).

25
26 Despite the structural differences between Russia and Ukraine, both countries featured
27
28 similar varieties of hybrid regimes in the 1990s and early-2000s and civic nation-building took a
29
30 similar path. As in El’tsin’s Russia, Ukraine’s government advanced a civic national project
31
32 premised upon inclusive citizenship, extensive protections of individual rights, and guarantees
33
34 for minority languages and cultures (Shulman 2002). However, as Shevel (2011b, 186–187)
35
36 observes, Ukraine’s nationalities ministry and its successors became deeply politicized in
37
38 bureaucratic disputes. Similar to Russia’s experience, the ministry underwent constant change
39
40 and cycling of leadership, taking on eight different incarnations (including subordination to two
41
42 other ministries) with 15 different directors (see TABLE 2). The intertwining of the ministry’s
43
44 operations with corrupt politics continued even after the apparent opening offered by the
45
46 Orange Revolution.¹⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, ethnicizing practices persisted in both national and
47
48 local policy-making despite formal civic nation-building, such that Karina Korostelina (2013, 312)

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57 ¹⁵ In rapid succession, the committee was hit with a series of scandals the new director was poached by
58 the government to be Deputy Interior Minister, followed by allegations of embezzlement to the tune of
59 one million hryvnias (about US\$200,000), public accusations of corruption and falsifying documents, and
60 then misuse of public funds to support the pro-government party in 2006 (Shevel 2011b, 188).

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4 found the country’s intellectual landscape to be “deficient in liberal civic ideologies that define
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6 society as a community of equal citizens independently of their ethnicity, language, or
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8 religion.”¹⁶
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10 11 12 13 CONCLUSION

14
15 This article has argued that the fate of Russia’s civic nation-building project was sealed by the
16
17 combination of personalist politics and institutional instability that were characteristic of hybrid
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19 regime politics in the 1990s. The conventional portrayals of El’tsin as either a firm proponent of
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21 civic nation-building or as uninterested in national identity both miss the mark. Similarly, it is not
22
23 the case that the Russian government left nationalist opposition actors to structure the debate
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25 on Russian ethnicity. El’tsin’s approach to nationalities policy might have been pragmatic and
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27 bureaucratic, but he was hardly a disinterested actor. Though the nationalities ministry began as
28
29 a platform for civic nation-building, it quickly fell victim to intra-regime competition and
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31 responsibility for nationalities policy came to be absorbed into the Presidential Administration.
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33 In this fashion, regime politics obstructed the government’s efforts at civic nation-building.
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40 Putin essentially continued the regime’s formal commitment to civic nation-building
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42 while maintaining a practical ambivalence. Starting with his “millennium manifesto” (Putin
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44 1999), he emphasized the importance of patriotism and traditional cultural values. Throughout
45
46 the 2000s, the Kremlin was hesitant to embrace ethnic nationalism given its unpredictable and
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57 ¹⁶ While Pop-Eleches and Robertson (2018) find movement in the direction of civic identification
58 (understood in terms of identification of Ukraine as one’s homeland) since Euromaidan, it is impossible to
59 disentangle this finding from the effects of conflict with Russia. Anecdotally, observers of Ukrainian
60 politics often quip that the conflict with Russia has done more to unify Ukraine than two decades of
61 independence.
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4 potentially destabilizing consequences (Hale 2016).¹⁷ Over time, however, Putin’s government
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6 filled an ambivalent civic nationhood with more popular ethnic content, including traditional
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8 Russian values, Orthodox religion, and Russian language, together with anti-Westernism and
9
10 Soviet-era nostalgia. The continuity between El’tsin’s and Putin’s nationalities policy was
11
12 exemplified by the government’s revised nationalities policy concept, which was drafted in 2012
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14 by four previous nationalities ministers whose experience spanned the 1990s and early 2000s:
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16 Valerii Tishkov, Vyacheslav Mikhailov, Vladimir Zorin, and Ramazan Abdulatipov. In commenting
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18 on the response to the draft policy from Russia’s regions, Mikhailov disclosed that the ministers
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20 were criticized for formulating a nationalities policy without a national idea (Gorodetskaya
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22 2012).
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28 When considered from a theoretical perspective, this observation suggests a reversal of
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30 traditional ways of considering the relationship between national identity and regime type:
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32 rather than ethnic nationalism fostering authoritarianism and civic nationalism fostering
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34 democracy, Russia’s experience demonstrates how competitive authoritarianism in the 1990s
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36 confounded the regime’s own efforts to institutionalize civic nationality and laid the groundwork
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38 for the ‘ethnic turn’ in Russian politics under Putin. It is important to stress that ambivalent
39
40 nation-building is a regime outcome more than a specific policy goal: the Kremlin pursues anti-
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42 extremism and cultivation of ethnic tolerance even as it selectively endorses popular demands
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44 for ethno-nationalism, effectively using identity politics to regulate political competition (Goode
45
46 2012). Understanding ambivalent nation-building as a regime outcome further answers
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48 Chapman et al’s (2018, 392) call to examine state policy and messaging to make sense of uneven
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58 ¹⁷ It is worth noting that Putin’s apparent embrace of nationalist legitimization with the annexation of
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60 Crimea was immediately complicated by the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine and the questions raised
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62 about Russia’s perceived obligations to Russian-speakers in the Donbas (Kolstø 2016b; Laruelle 2016).
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4 levels of xenophobia given “the contradictory relationship between government sponsored anti-
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6 immigrant campaigns combined with relatively benign official rhetoric on minorities in Russia.”
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9 This study further suggests that scholars of nationalism and ethnic politics may gain new
10 insights into the relationship between regime type and social identities by problematizing
11 institutional instability. Much of contemporary constructivist research examines the
12
13 institutional instability. Much of contemporary constructivist research examines the
14
15 manipulation of identity repertoires and boundaries in democratic states with relatively stable
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17 institutions, with particular emphasis on the ways that institutions create incentives for political
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19 actors to manipulate or cross ethnic boundaries (Chandra 2012; Wimmer 2013). A broad range
20
21 of institutions - potentially including educational, language, legal, cultural, and military
22
23 structures - produce and sustain a pervasive and visible sense of ethnic unity or group-ness
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25 (Brubaker 2004; Harty 2001). By the same token, state institutions may strengthen ethnic
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27 differences in ways that reinforce rather than diminish social cleavages (Lieberman 2009;
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29 Lieberman and Singh 2012). However, institutional instability augments the availability of
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31 identity repertoires in various ways – for instance, by eliminating the standardized menu of
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33 identity choices, severing the expectation of resources bound to group identities, or
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35 complicating the attribution of ethnic grievances. Importantly, institutional instability proved to
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37 be acceptable to Russian elites who benefited from access to rents, the ability to limit political
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39 and economic competition, and weak accountability (Hellman 1998; Melville and Mironyuk
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41 2016).
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48 The situation in Russia differed not only from standard constructivist accounts of
49
50 identity politics in stable institutional environments, but also from accounts that treated
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52 institutional instability as a dimension of regime transition. In Jack Snyder’s (2000) “elite
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54 persuasion model,” for example, post-communist elites threatened by democratization may be
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56 tempted to stoke nationalist conflict to maintain power, exploiting lingering media control and
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4 weak institutional accountability characteristic of transitional regime dynamics. Yet such threats
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6 were unlikely to materialize where elite incentives converged around opaque governance and
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8 oligarchical control. The result for civic nation-building was thus symptomatic of the fate of
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10 democratization—or more accurately, the sources of hybrid regime stability and
11
12 autocratization—in post-Soviet Russia.
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16 The absence of a consistent and institutionalized approach to civic nation-building
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18 further suggests that nation-building in Russia was society-led (rather than state-led), highly
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20 diverse, and formed at least partly in response to the state’s obvious failings during the 1990s
21
22 (Oushakine 2009). The key to understanding the recent ‘ethnic turn’ in Russian politics may thus
23
24 be to scrutinize the disconnect between everyday nationalism and elite or official nationalism.
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26 There is a growing body of literature that addresses the ways national identities are shaped and
27
28 mobilized within society through citizens’ everyday practices (Brubaker et al. 2006; Fox and
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30 Miller-Idriss 2008; Goode and Stroup 2015). While these studies tend to be situated within
31
32 stable states with developed institutions, the weak institutional environment of hybrid regimes
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34 presents an opportunity to examine the “bottom-up” influence of everyday nationalism.
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40 Finally, such an approach potentially helps to account for the choices made by post-
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42 Soviet autocrats to seek out nationalist legitimization, even when it appears to go against their
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44 interests. While elites sometimes advance nationalist projects that do not resonate with the
45
46 masses, they are more likely to organize and give shape to already-existing vernacular
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48 nationalisms (Whitmeyer 2002). El’tsin’s regime left behind an unconvincing formal edifice of
49
50 civic nation-building and a great many vernacular ethnic repertoires. Putin added these
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52 repertoires to his legitimization strategy in piecemeal fashion, borrowing from previous historical
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54 eras, common-sense dimensions of Russian national identity, and competing elite
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56 constituencies—in effect, a balancing act of maintaining popular appeal while managing political
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competition. This manner of fusing cultural and historical legacies with popular appeal is particularly evident, for instance, in the regime’s promotion of patriotic sporting events (Arnold 2018). Yet the more diluted the already-vague notion of civic nationality, the easier it was for elites as well as ordinary Russians to fill the concept with ethnic content. The long-term concern for the Kremlin, then, is whether its version of civic nationhood (presented under the rubric of patriotism) secures legitimacy for the regime, or whether a widening gap between official and everyday nationalism gives rise to a potentially volatile combination of official conformism and informal ethnic outbidding.

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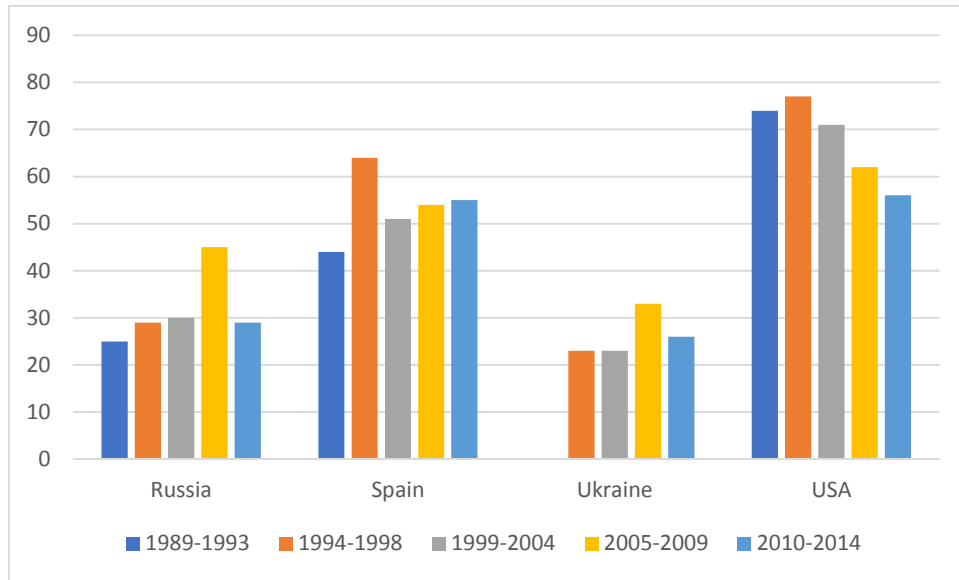
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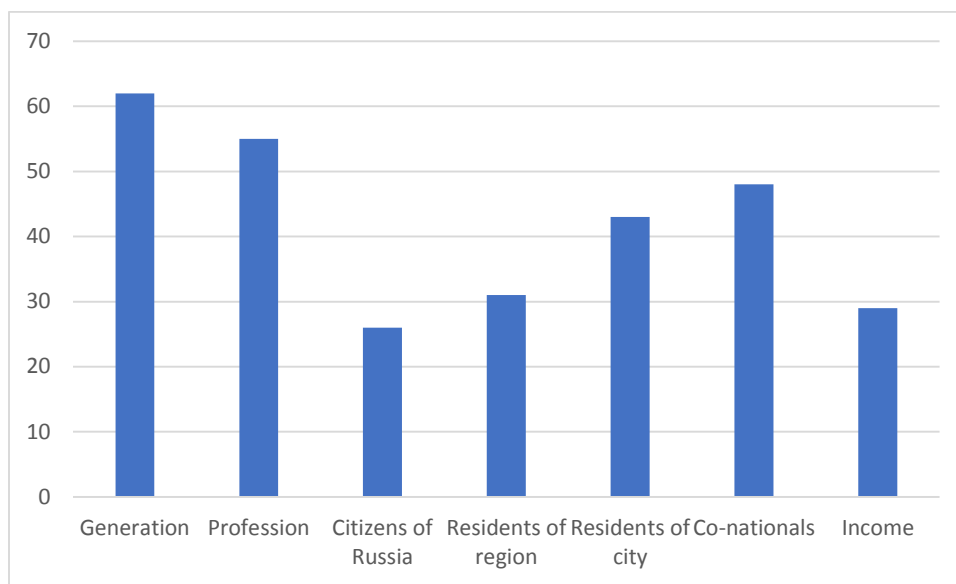
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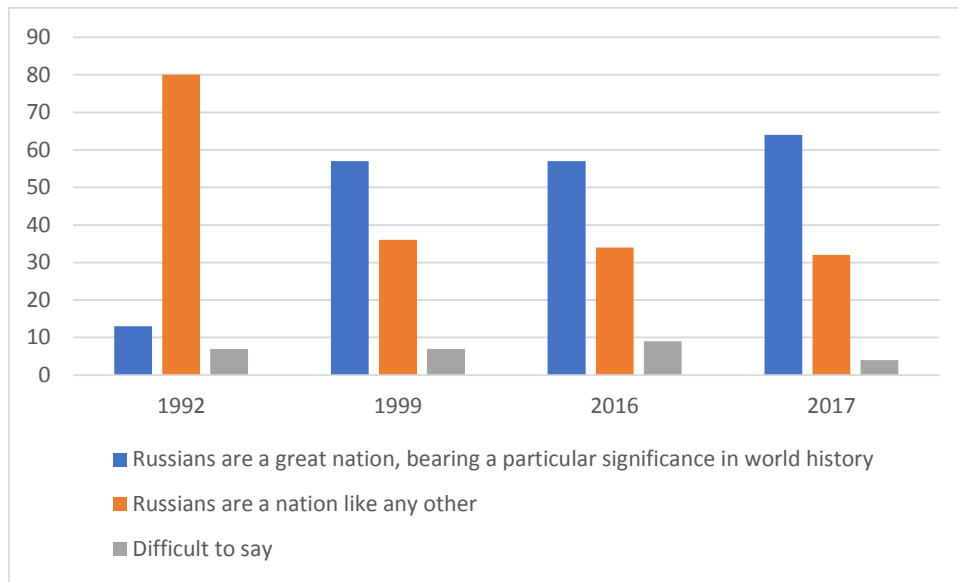
FIGURE 1: HOW PROUD ARE YOU TO BE RUSSIAN (ROSSIYANIN) - % “VERY PROUD”

Source: R. Inglehart, C. Haerpfer, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin, and B. Puranen, eds. 2014. *World Values Survey: Round Six - Country-Pooled Datafile*. Madrid: JD Systems Institute. <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>.

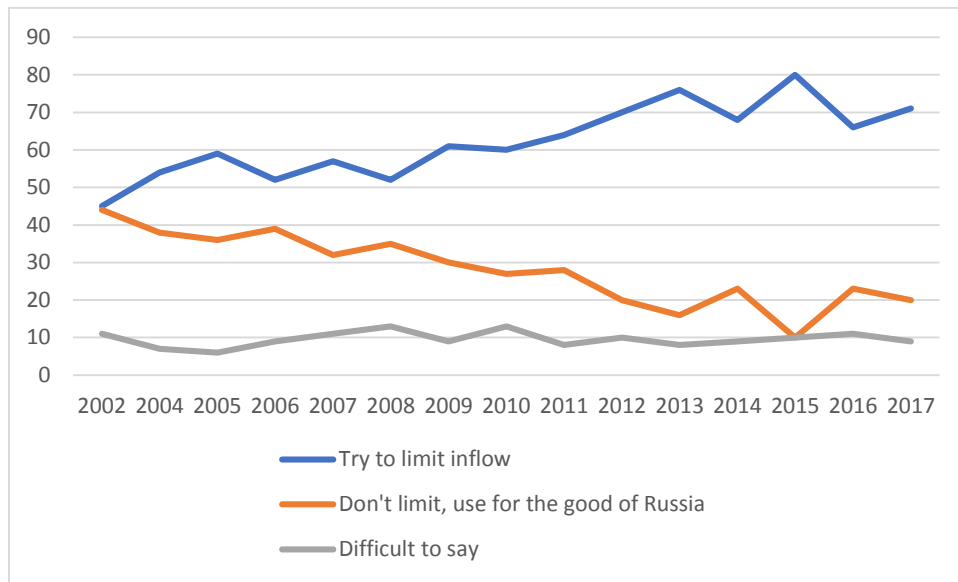
FIGURE 2: RUSSIANS' SENSE OF UNITY



Source: L. M. Drobizheva. 2017. "Grazhdanskaya Identichnost' Kak Uslovie Oslableniya Etnicheskogo Negativizma." *Mir Rossii* 26 (1): 7–31.

FIGURE 3: CHARACTERIZATION OF ETHNIC RUSSIANS AS A NATION

Source: Analiticheskii Tsentri Yurii Levady. 2018. *Obshchestvennoe Mnenie - 2017: Ezhegodnik*. Moscow: Levada-Tsentri. <https://www.levada.ru/sbornik-obshhestvennoe-mnenie/obshhestvennoe-mnenie-2017/>.

FIGURE 4: PREFERRED GOVERNMENT POLICY TOWARDS MIGRANTS

Source: Analiticheskii Tsentri Yurii Levady. 2018. *Obshchestvennoe Mnenie - 2017: Ezhegodnik*. Moscow: Levada-Tsentri. <https://www.levada.ru/sbornik-obshhestvennoe-mnenie/obshhestvennoe-mnenie-2017/>.

TABLE 1: RUSSIA'S NATIONALITIES MINISTRIES, 1991-2015

Year	Name	Director/Minister
1991	State Committee on Nationalities Policy	Gennadii Burbulis/ Sergei Shakhrai
1992		Valerii Tishkov
1992-1993		Sergei Shakhrai
1993	State Committee on Federation and Nationalities Policy	Sergei Shakhrai
1994	Ministry of Nationality Affairs and Regional Policy	Sergei Shakhrai
1994-1995		Nikolai Egorov
1995-1996		Vyacheslav Mikhailov
1996	Ministry for Nationality Affairs and Federal Relations	Vyacheslav Mikhailov
1998	Ministry for Regional and Nationalities Policy	Evgenii Sapiro
1998-1999	Ministry for Nationality Policy	Ramazan Abdulatipov
1998-1999	Ministry for Regional Policy	Valerii Kirpichnikov
1999-2000	Ministry for Federation Affairs and Nationalities	Vyacheslav Mikhailov
2000		Aleksandr Blokhin
2000-2001	Ministry for Federation Affairs, Nationality, and Migration Policy	Aleksandr Blokhin
2001-2004	[minister without portfolio responsible for nationalities affairs]	Vladimir Zorin
2004	Department of Inter-Ethnic Relations (Ministry of Regional Development)	Yurii Balakhnin
2006		Aleksandr Zhuravskii
2013	Department of State Policy for Inter-Ethnic Relations (Ministry of Regional Development)	Aleksandr Zhuravskii
2014	Department of Inter-Ethnic Relations (Ministry of Culture)	Aleksandr Zhuravskii
2015-present	Federal Agency for Nationality Affairs	Igor' Barinov

TABLE 2: UKRAINE'S NATIONALITIES MINISTRIES, 1993-2015

Year	Name	Director/Minister
1993	Ministry for Nationalities and Migration	Oleksandr Yemets'
1994	Ministry of Nationalities, Migration, and Cults	Mykola Shul'ha
1995	Ministry of Nationalities and Migration	Volodymyr Yevtukh
1996	State Committee for Nationalities and Migration	Volodymyr Yevtukh
1998		Mykola Rud'ko
2000	Department for Nationalities and Migration (Ministry of Justice)	Hryhorii Sereda
2001	State Committee for Nationalities and Migration	Hryhorii Sereda
2002		Hennadii Moskal
2005		Serhii Rudyk
2006	State Committee for Nationalities and Religion	Serhii Rudyk
2007		Heorhii Popov
2008-2009		Oleksandr Sahan'
2009-2010		Yurii Reshetnikov
2010		Yurii Bohuts'kyi
2011	Department of Religious Affairs and Nationalities (Ministry of Culture)	Volodymyr Lyubchik
2013		Mikhailo Moshkol
2014		Volodymyr Yushkevych
2014-present		Andrii Yurash