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Abstract: The article draws upon theories of identity to understand Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine since 2000. The article argues that contemporary Russian foreign policy can be best understood as an articulation of 'civilizational nationalism' which relies on the myth of cultural superiority. The focus is on not only treating Russia as an imperial power, but on the cultural claims that this relies upon and its configuration within changing historical ideas of 'Russianness'. Since the Orange Revolution, Russian presidents have accused Ukraine of following anti-Russian policies. This has been aided by a discourse of 'civilizational nationalism' where Ukraine is described as being part of a 'Greater Russia', rather than as a sovereign territory. This article analyses how imagined civilization and greatness of Russian culture is driving foreign policy-making towards the Ukraine. Rather than an external territory, Ukraine is constructed as a 'little brother' which renders interventions legitimate.

Keywords: civilizational nationalism; Putin; nationalism; the Russian state; Russian foreign policy

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INTRODUCTION

After the annexation of Crimea, in his Address to the Federal Assembly in 2014, President Putin declared that 'Crimea is where our people live' and Crimea and Sevastopol 'have invaluable civilizational and even sacral importance for Russia' (Putin, 2014a). In the current literature on Russian foreign policy, Russia's annexation was seen as 'the return to empire' (Grigas, 2016), a 'legitimization of the Kremlin's status quo' (Goode and Laruelle, 2014), or 'imperial' (Ioffe, 2014). Although this literature explains the imperial tendencies of the Russian state's foreign policy outcomes, it lacks a discussion of the civilizational claims of the state and tends to ignore how this is central to great power politics. Drawing upon and extending current debates on the sources of Russian foreign policy, this article asks: How do we understand the discourse of 'our people' and 'civilizational importance' in the study of Russian foreign policy? This article is concerned with the discourse of civilizational nationalism and argues that Russian foreign policy, and actions towards Ukraine, can be understood through the ongoing political use of the myth of Russia and Russian 'greatness' and cultural/civilizational superiority. To explore this, the article focuses on how civilizational nationalism is driving foreign policy towards Ukraine.

During Putin's administration, the discourse of Russian civilization and the myth of greatness have been embodied in various foreign policy decisions. Although the recent Crimean crisis was the first time that Russia claimed to defend the rights of '*Russkii*' (ethnic Russians) explicitly abroad, there has been a telling slippage between ethnic and civic nationalism in official speeches. For instance, in the South Ossetia war in 2008, Russia claimed that the rights of '*Rossiiskii*' (Russian citizens) were at risk. On the other hand, in his address to the Federal Assembly after the annexation of Crimea, he referred to Russians in ethnic terms. Although there is a slippage between ethnic and civilizational nationalism in the official discourse, ethnic nationalism constitutes and contributes to wider Russian 'civilization'. In some official

documents this resulted in including Ukrainians in the wider Russian civilization. However, elsewhere, Ukraine was represented as 'Little Brother' to greater Russia which referred to the people of Ukraine as secondary to wider Russian civilization. Thus, this article is concerned with continuity (see also Tom Casier, 2006; Lukáš Tichý, 2017) in Russian foreign policy, even in times of uncertainty, and this continuity explains Russian foreign policy rather than the discourse change in the 2014 speech, as some scholars argue.

In the IR and area studies literature, scholars have already shown an interest in 'the Russian idea', 'national idea', patriotism, nationalism/patriotism, patriotic rhetoric and ideology in Russian domestic and foreign policies (Breslauer, 2009; March, 2007; March, 2012; Laruelle, 2009; Laruelle *et al* 2010; Laruelle *et al* 2012; Lucas, 2008; Luke, 2012; Panov, 2010; Shnirelman, 2009; Ziegler, 2016). Kolstø and Blakkisrud's recent study also works on Putin's Crimean speech and Russian nationalism (2016). In the study of Russian nationalism, there are fascinating discussions on the imperial legacy of Russian nationalism (Pain, 2016), not ethnic but imperial nationalism (Mitrofanova, 2016), imperial and ethnonationalism discussion (Kolstø, 2016), ethnic Russian great power nationalism (Alexseev, 2016), and the boundaries between civic and ethnic nationalism (Blakkisrud, 2016).

Following this literature, this article aims to extend these discussions by suggesting an extended conceptual framework for the study of official nationalism. Ethnic nationalism is defined in this article as nationalism which refers to ethnic Russians in the country and excludes the other nationals. After the breakup of the USSR, Russian leaders were cautious about using this term in their speeches. They preferred using civic nationalism and promoted patriotism which includes all nations in the country regardless of their ethnic background. However, after 2006, civilizational nationalism was actively introduced to replace civic nationalism to emphasise the greatness of Russian culture, heritage and civilization. Civilizational nationalism was often utilised by Russian leadership to glorify 1000 years of history, great Russian culture and

civilization. However, it is uncertain as to who is included and excluded within this greatness. I argue that ethnic nationalism is blended within the myth of the greatness of Russia, civilization and the Orthodox Church. The Russian state has utilised the discourse of civilization as a project to include people in the country, while ethnic origins of citizens were still present and important. For instance, the Russian state often defended the rights of people within the dominance of Russian culture. Moreover, Russian culture and language are seen as the contributors to civilizational nationalism where ethnic Russians are the main drivers. Although Putin's 2014 speech was seen as a turn to ethnic nationalism, nationalism was not born with the collapse of the Soviet Union, 'it existed underneath and in it' (Laruelle, 2009, 2). For instance, all Soviet citizens had to carry their passports with them which indicated their ethnic identity (Kolstø, 2016, 42).

To explore the current importance of civilizational nationalism to Russian foreign policy, this article draws Historical Institutional (HI) and constructivist approaches to place 'myth making' in an appropriate political context. The article argues that civilizational nationalism has become the main discourse of the Russian state in reference to how they 'narrate the nation' (Bhabha, 1990). Since 2000, the official discourse in Russia often referenced Russian unique culture and civilization, and civilizational discourse became useful for elites as a tool of state (re)making. HI sheds a light on explaining how the Russian state structured formal/informal institutions to maintain the myth of greatness. This has become more important in domestic and foreign policies and it has been utilised in the making of foreign policy towards the post-soviet states. Thus, this has become the main official ideology of the Russian state, promoting greatness of Russian culture and civilization.

Two meanings of 'Russians' in the Russian language

In the Russian language, there are two words which are used to refer to Russians. One is '*Rossiiskii*' which refers to Russian citizens; the other is '*Russkii*' which refers to ethnic Russians. Since the break up of the Soviet Union, the successive presidents were cautious about referring to Russians in the country as citizens, and they often utilised Russian nationalism as in civic terms. It is true that the Crimean crisis was the first time that the Russian leaders claimed to defend the rights of ethnic Russians (*Russkii*) abroad. However, this article argues that the Russian state blended statism with a mythologizing of Russian history and civilization. For instance, in an article Putin wrote:

The Russian people are state-builders, as evidenced by the existence of Russia. Civilizational identity is based on preserving the dominance of Russian culture, although this culture is represented not only by ethnic Russians, but by all the holders of this identity, regardless of their ethnicity (Putin, 2012a).

Some scholars argue that the traditional civic, multi-ethnic identity of Russia was shifted towards an ethnic-cultural core which was transformed into Russianness (Blakkisrud, 2016, 250). This Russianness, importantly, is still imperial, focusing on ethnic Russians as the civilizing/leading group. This was historically led by the Russian state through certain institutions. For instance, then-Kremlin ideologist Vladislav Surkov promoted 'sovereign democracy' in 2006 which rests upon Russia's own civilizational path and how the country should follow its own way of democracy. Moreover, in 2007 Putin signed a decree on the establishment of '*Russkiy Mir*' (Russian World). The *Russkiy Mir* foundation defined their mission as: 'to promote understanding and peace in the world by supporting, enhancing and encouraging the appreciation of Russian language, heritage and culture' (Russkiy Mir Foundation, 2016). The reference to language and culture here marks a particular shift, because the claim of civilizational nationalism starts to rest on the active improvement of Russian people and through the promotion of a Russian culture. This was central to the way that tensions

emerged between Russia and Ukraine in 2009 when then-president Medvedev accused Ukraine of being anti-Russian.

In order to understand the relationship between civilizational nationalism and foreign policy, this article forwards three interrelated themes: ethnicity, civilization and statism. These themes have been chosen 1) regarding their usage and emphasis in presidential speeches; 2) because of their interconnections with one another. All the themes analysed here form the official state ideology in Russia and contribute to the recovery of the nation according to official understanding. Civilization emphasises the historical discourse of a great lineage of Russian history and culture which is both unique and in need of preservation. What I want to emphasise in using civilization in connection with nationalism and statism, is how the greatness of Russian culture is not only structured through formal/informal institutions, but also how claims to civilization work to strengthen and shape state power. Whilst civilization can allude to ethnicity, I treat it as a separate analytical category which emphasises how Soviet politics relies on a more explicit shift from the usage of civic and ethnic terms of nationalism. The power of a discourse of ethnicity not only strengthens appeals to civilization, but an emphasis on the ‘Russian people’ often works to strengthen the statist discourse and the ideal that Russians have a special mission in Eurasia as ‘state builders’.

The article is divided into three sections. In the first section, the article discusses what it understands by nations and nationalism. In the second section, it will turn to the themes on ethnicity, civilization and statism. In the last section, it will look at the civilizational nationalism in the wake of Crimea and how Ukraine is defined as ‘Little Brother’.

NATIONS AND NATIONALISM

Before turning to a more specific discussion of Russia and Ukraine, we need to ask how do we understand nations and nationalism? As an ideology and social movement, nationalism

emerged at the end of the eighteenth century (Özkırıklı, 2000, 12). As well as a doctrine (Kedourie, 1994, 1), it was also defined as “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining the autonomy, unity and identity of a nation” (Smith, 1991, p. 74). This article, draws on Özkırıklı’s discursive position which observes how 'nationalism is a discourse that constantly shapes our consciousness and the way we constitute the meaning of the world' (Özkırıklı, 2000, 4). Here and 'there is nothing outside of discourse' (Campbell, 1992, 4).

If we define nationalism as a discourse, what are the characteristics of it? Özkırıklı argues that there are three main characteristics: 1) it claims that the interests and values of the nation override all other interests and values; 2) it regards the nation as the only source of legitimacy; 3) it operates through binary division – between ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘friends’ and ‘foes’”(Özkırıklı, 2000, p. 230). The discourse of nationalism is worth exploring because traditions, customs and institutions of an ethnic community are constantly reconstructed (Smith, 1991, 358). During this reconstruction, more importantly, Özkırıklı argues that it is the 'discourse' of nationalism that reconstructs and reinterprets modern cultures (Özkırıklı, 2000, 221). Studying the official discourse of Russian elites and leaders, this article analyses the official documents by Russian leaders (Putin, Medvedev), and articles (Putin and Surkov), in order to tease out what is being ‘reconstructed’ and the political work this does.

If nationalism is a discourse, how then do we understand the nation and its members? The discourse of nationalism defines cultural collectivities as a 'nation' and the members of these collectivities as 'citizens' (Özkırıklı, 2000, 229). To other scholars, a nation is 'a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members' (Smith, 1991, 14). However, this article believes that the nation “is an imagined political community” (Anderson, 1991, 6) and then we can say that nationalist discourse can be based on constructed common history. This can be easily seen in the case of Russia, where the Russian leaders often

refer to the constructed 'historical past' of the country as a way of unifying the nation. Arguably, political ideological discourse can reactivate 'a common sense' which can be extracted from national identity (Finlayson, 1998, 102). Here, it is important to understand how 'common sense' normalises certain configurations of identity, and certain historical constricts and myths as both 'natural' and 'given'.

Here it is worth turning to Campbell's argument that 'Identity is not fixed by nature...Difference is constituted in relation to identity...a self from the other, a domestic from a foreign' (Campbell, 1992, 8). This is why the theory of nationalism should study the construction and reconstruction of national *identities* as well as the rhetoric and ideologies (Norman, 1999, 56). The rhetoric of nationalism is not only important for 'imposing a collective sense of belonging on disparate individuals' (Malik, 1996, 218), but also for political communities. Smith defines 'national' identity 'which involves some sense of political community' (Smith, 1991, 9), and he also defines political community as common institutions and some codes of rights for the community (p. 8).

If we understand national identity as a common culture including myths and memories (Smith, 1991, 14), we can argue that cultural nationalism promotes these collectivities to construct national consciousness. National identity and nations have some components as ethnic, cultural, territorial, economic and legal-political (Smith, 1991, 1) and states define political identity because their success is largely dependent upon it (Tickner, 1996, 153). However, this is not to claim that these components are fixed or given to the nation, but instead produced through the discourse of nationalism itself.

If a nation is an imagined community and nationalism is a discourse to reconstruct and reinterpret this imagination, how do we then understand the references to Russian civilization?

I propose that nationalism is a statist and instrumental construct in Russia, and civilizational

nationalism is a particular assemblage of elements that fulfils certain political functions for the Russian state. While studying state nationalism in Russia, this article proposes that civilizational discourse is the core of the Russian state's ideology in its framing of foreign policy towards post-soviet states, particularly Ukraine. Especially after the Maidan crisis, the Russian state blamed Ukraine for following anti-Russian policies. However, this was not the first time that Russian leaders had accused Ukraine of following anti-Russian policies. This also happened in 2009 when then-president Medvedev wrote a letter to Yushchenko accusing the leader of being 'anti-Russian' (BBC, 2009; Russia Today, 2009; Schwirtz, 2009). By anti-Russian policies, the Russian leaders made reference to Russian language and Russian culture. This discourse is important, not only to interpret the wider foreign policy, but also Russia's imperial claims in the post-Soviet space. In order to sketch out this analysis in more detail below, I analyse the official documents by Russian leaders (Putin, Medvedev) and their popular articles (Putin and Surkov). By analysing these documents, this author reviews Addresses to the Federal Assembly from 2000 to 2014, articles by Putin in several Russian newspapers and articles of the former Kremlin ideologist Vladislav Surkov.

The next section will discuss ethnicity, civilization and statism and how these themes have become the determinants of the official discourse in Russia.

Ethnicity and Civilization

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, ethnicity has been used very carefully by the Russian leaders. Yeltsin had preferred to refer to the nation more in civic than in ethnic terms. In his Addresses to the Federal Assembly, Putin also referred to people in Russia in civic terms. However, there has been slippage between the terms of ethnic and civic Russians in official state discourses. Before moving onto these, it is worth defining the nation in Russia. In the literature, there are three forms of definitions of nation in Russia: Russia as a community of

ethnic Russians, as a community of Eastern Slavs or as a community of Russian speakers. Shevel argues that they depend on cultural rather than political principles and this is why these can still be defined as ethnic rather than civic (2011, 180). Either civic or ethnic, nationalism is motivated by the idea of building a nation. Verkhovsky argues that there are two cases where nationalism can be successful: either with the idea of social modernization (as in the French revolution) or institutionalising the state (2009, 89). In Russia, nationalism has become successful by maintaining state mechanisms and institutionalizing the formal and informal structures.

Regarding the ethnicity question and identity question of Russians, there were two main existential questions during the 19th and 20th centuries by Russian intellectuals: 'Is the historical path of Russia the same as that of Western Europe, or has Russia a special path of its own with its civilization belonging to another type?' (Berdyayev, 1947, 39). According to these two intellectual movements (Slavophiles and Westernizers), the Slavophiles believed in Russia's unique way of development and viewed Russia as unique and separate, whereas Westernizers believed in the need to follow Western civilization for cultural/political development and wanted Russia to be part of Western civilization (Sputnik, 2010; Bayer, 2012). Moreover, according to some scholars, the Slavophiles' efforts were an attempt to solve the identity crises in the country; in this sense it was a project for social change (Rabow-Edling, 2006, 2). This is why Rabow-Edling argues that it can be best understood when this debate is situated in cultural nationalism.

If the questions around national identity are crucial to study the political discourse in Russia, what were the intellectual discussions in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s? According to Sergey Karaganov, Russia's most critical foreign policy problem has been the unresolved question of which is more important: economic development and prosperity, which lay the foundation for future influence, or current prestige – prestige that is often ephemeral

(Karaganov, 2000). Karaganov's statement above has been the main debate amongst intellectuals since 1991. As well as these questions, in an article the former Secretary of Defence in 1998, Sergey Kokoshin, discussed the question of whether Russia is a superpower or a great power (Kokoshin, 2002, 12)

In his article, entitled 'Russia in Search of Itself', Sergey Stankevich discusses foreign policy and how Russia is in search of itself in the international system. He argues that 'dealings with the surrounding world are helping shape Russian statehood and helping Russia recognise its interests'. With an opportunistic pragmatism in foreign policy, according to him, Russia's mission should be 'conciliator, connecting and combining'. He also mentioned that it is Russia's long-term strategic interest to have special ties with the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) (Stankevich, 1992, 47). Thus, intellectual discussions around Russia's belonging either to the West or the East, or whether they self-identify themselves as European or Eurasians (White *et al*, 2005), have constructed the contemporary debates by the Russian elites.

Karaganov and Vladislavlev in their article also discuss 'the Russian idea'. To them, 'Russia has a unique historical chance to frame an integral national-interests-oriented policy capable of filling the vacuum of ideas and power' (Karaganov and Vladislavlev, 1992, 32). Thus, the discussions in the 19th and 20th centuries became known as Atlanticist and Eurasianist. However, Stankevich supports the idea that Russia needs a new balance within Eastern and Western orientations (Stankevich, 1992). From this point of view, being a negotiator was seen as Russia's mission between the West and the CIS.

Although Russian leaders often condemned all sorts of ethnic nationalism and promoted civic nationalism, this article proposes that this was constructed around the myth of 'greatness of Russia' and 'Russian culture'. The existential discussions and civilizational debate over Russians belonging either to the East or the West also led towards ethnic Russians' missions

towards other nationals in the country. In one of his articles published in 2012, Putin stated that 'The great mission of Russians (ethnic) is to unite and bind our civilization' (Putin, 2012b). In this form of idealisation 'Russians are viewed as the people of great historical mission, as those who inherited special spirituality' (Panov, 2010, 92). This kind of historical mission dates back to Russia's 1,000-year-old traditions and the emphasis on Russia's values (cultural, spiritual and moral) and consists of both nationalist and conservative elements (March, 2012, 405).

In his article Putin states 'The core, the binding fabric of this unique civilization – is the Russian (*Russkie*) people, Russian (*Russkaya*) culture' (Putin, 2012b). Thus, Putin was suggesting a unifying Russian culture with a unique civilization only by the *Russkii* who have a 'civilizing mission' among other ethnic groups. In his Address to the Federal Assembly in 2005, without referring to ethnic Russians, Putin emphasized this 'civilizing mission' in Eurasia: 'Russia should continue its civilizing mission on the Eurasian continent' (Putin, 2005). This mission has not been affiliated with any ethnic groups in the country, but with Russia itself. The next section will be concerned with the structuring of state institutions through the myth of the greatness of Russia.

Statism

During the 2000s, Putin utilised formal and informal institutions to build stability in the country. As it was an attempt to mobilise Russian society, this kind of patriotism should be analysed as an ideology (Laruelle, 2009, 1). As Laruelle argues, it is important to see that nationalism and nationalist ideas are not new to Russia and it is not an opposition to the soviet regime but a continuation of it (Laruelle, 2009, 2). Her argument is important to discuss the construction of ideas within historical context.

If we look at the idealization of the Russian position in the world, it was 'the necessary psychological protection and support of the nation through centuries of bitter struggle for its

very survival' (Arbatov, 2005). To Arbatov, it was also part of the 'colonial consciousness' of a nation that wants to extend its civilization to the undeveloped nations and countries. Putin's foreign policies 'have been informed by a perception of Russia's new-found strength and by an emotion akin to resentment – a nationalism that is driven by a pervasive and strong sense of grievance' (Breslauer, 2009, 370). As stated in the Millennium speech, and later on in his articles, for the stability of the country, Putin believed in strong state. March argues that although statist's foreign policy is not fully nationalistic, its central part is. This statist rhetoric represents great power status almost as a 'national mission, and it sees itself in quasi-nationalistic emotional and even spiritual terms' (March, 2014, 18).

How then is the construction of the greatness of Russian culture structured in formal/informal institutions? In 2006, Putin officially endorsed sovereign democracy as the government's official ideology (Mijnssen, 2014, 24) or as Ziegler puts it: 'sovereign democracy is closely tied to the ideology of great power status and imperial designs' (2012, 407). For implementing this idea, the regime adopted 'vertical power' where state power was structured by a top-down approach. As well as the Russian leaders, the Kremlin ideologists often referred to Russian civilization. In his articles and speeches, he defends 'Russian civilization' as being part of 'European civilization' but only 'in a specific Russian version of that civilization' (Surkov, 2010, 11). In this specific version Russia needs to practise its own way of understanding based on its own political culture. He reminds the Russian elites not to lose Russia's own self-identification: 'we shouldn't lose our self-identification, we shouldn't be dissolved, and we shouldn't be receiving external direction' (Surkov, 2010, 81). For the implementation of this Russian way of democracy, "vertical power, now with an 'ideology' accepted fully by the people" needs to be enriched (Surkov, 2010, 78).

In the discourse of nationalism, Russian presidents often emphasised the greatness of Russian culture, civilization, and patriotism. Suny argues that in the earliest years of the Soviet Union,

the Bolsheviks were speaking of backward or uncivilized people and Russians were the more civilized (Suny, 2001, 17). On the other hand, the country's greatness has also been discussed during Putin's tenure where it has been seen as 'Greater Orient' (Luzyanin, 2007) or 'civilized nation'. It is this perception which holds itself and its civilization 'unique' and desires to extend this civilization to the other CIS countries which are in its own perception less civilized or already inseparable from Russian culture.

As well as cultural civilization, in a later article Putin discusses the idea that 'state civilization' will unite all the ethnic groups in Russia only within a common language and culture and 'this kind of civilizational identity is based on preserving the dominance of Russian culture' (Putin, 2012a). State civilization, in his eyes, is 'reinforced by the Russian people, Russian language, Russian culture, the Russian Orthodox Church and the country's other traditional religions. It is precisely the state-civilization model that has shaped our state polity' (Putin, 2013a).

In the reference of Russian culture and civilization, the Russian presidents utilised formal and informal structures to strengthen state power. One of the most important institutions, arguably, has been the Russian Church. The Orthodox Church was banned in the Soviet Union for years. After the dissolution of the USSR, the new Patriarch in Russia received a new position. The Orthodox Church has become an important institution for the mobilisation of people and legitimising state power. It is important both because it has an agenda outside Russian territories, and has regular meetings with the foreign ministry in Russia (Barry, 2012). Particularly in his first term, and at some occasions in the second, 'Putin has used Orthodoxy as a platform for unifying the Russian state – as opposed to the nation' (Admiraal, 2009, 205).

In structuring a national identity and constructing political collectivities, national symbols, customs and ceremonies are the most important aspects of nationalism (Smith, 1991, 77). As well as the other Soviet symbols - such as the Soviet anthem and the Soviet flag - Putin used

Orthodoxy more than Yeltsin (March, 2007, 46). The Church has become a subordinate power which supports the state and its institutions. The patriarch has not only become an important figure who supports all state policies, he also strengthens the power of embedded ideas within the institutions. Thus, the patriarch would not only praise the foreign ministry for their support on foreign policy (Sputnik, 2014), but would also express his concerns over the recent crisis with Ukraine (Higgins 2014).

Antoine Arjakovsky, director of research at the College des Bernardins in Paris and founder of the Institute of Ecumenical Studies in Lviv, said: “For them (referring to Putin and the patriarch), democracy is a danger. They invented a new mythology, the new ideology of 'Russkymir,' of the Russian idea, which would invent a kind of new theology of politics” (Kishkovsky, 2014).

In the construction of the greatness of Russia and its civilization, the Orthodox Church played an important role. The patriarch often praised the president and state power. He once declared Putin’s era as the 'Miracle of God' in 2012 (Foust, 2012) and criticised his opponents (Bryanski, 2012). He was also supported by the Russian elites and ministers as well. In 2008, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, stated that:

It is impossible to overestimate the contribution of the Primate of the Church to strengthening the positions of our Fatherland in the world and enhancing the international prestige of Russia. His firm stand for the preservation of moral principles in politics and for the promotion of understanding between peoples and civilizations is, undoubtedly, an important part of his legacy (Lavrov, 2008).

The next section will discuss the annexation of Crimea and nationalist discourse through ethnicity, civilization and statism.

Civilizational nationalism in the wake of Crimea and Ukraine as 'little brother'

Self-determination of the Russian (ethnic) people – a poly-ethnic civilization, held together by a Russian cultural core ... the civilizational identity is based on the preservation of a Russian (ethnic) cultural dominance, which follows not only from ethnic Russians... This is the cultural code (Putin, 2012b).

How are we then to understand these themes through the annexation of Crimea? In their addresses to the Federal Assembly, Putin and Medvedev often emphasised 'to strengthen the state' (Putin, 2001, 2004), 'the greatness of Russia' (Putin, 2003), 'the effective state system' (Putin, 2005), Russia's great history and culture (Medvedev, 2008; Putin, 2005, 2013), patriotism (Putin, 2003, 2012c, 2013b; Medvedev, 2008), 'patriotic upbringing' (Medvedev, 2010). The two leaders not only focused on both the greatness of Russia and the state, but also often referred to the great Russian civilization and Russia's civilizing mission in the post-soviet space. In his reference to civilization, Putin stated that 'For centuries, Russia developed as a multi-ethnic nation, a civilization-state bonded by the Russian people, Russian language and Russian culture native for all of us, uniting us and preventing us from dissolving in this diverse world' (Putin, 2012c). Thus, the core of this speech was the implication that the greatness of Russian culture would bind the people of Russia with the Russian language. On the other hand, in 2014 he added Christianity as part of the unifying force:

In addition to ethnic similarity, a common language, common elements of their material culture, a common territory..., Christianity was a powerful spiritual unifying force that helped involve various tribes and tribal unions of the vast Eastern Slavic world in the creation of a Russian nation and Russian state" (Putin, 2014b).

These references to civilization are quite crucial to understand the discourse of the Russian state since 2000. As well as Putin, Medvedev also referred to Russian civilization:

I think it could hardly be otherwise when we are talking about a people with more than a thousand years of history, a people that have developed and brought civilization to a vast territory, created a unique culture and built up powerful economic and military potential, a people who act on the solid basis of values and ideals that have taken shape over the centuries and stood the test of time (Medvedev, 2008).

This civilizational discourse became more obvious with Ukraine's intention to join the EU and NATO in 2004. Ukraine stated its intention to be part of NATO after the presidential elections in 2004. After the parliamentary elections in Ukraine in 2007, relations worsened. In 2008 the State Duma declared that Russia should withdraw from the friendship treaty with Ukraine (RFE/RL, 2008) in response to the membership Action Plan of NATO. Following this proposal, former Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov discussed returning Crimea and Sevastopol to Russia: 'We should terminate the friendship treaty in any case, regardless of whether Ukraine will enter NATO or not' (Unian, 2008).

Among the other states of the region, Ukraine is more important for several reasons. First, it is mythologized as the birth place of the Russian state (Donaldson and Noguee 1998, 156). KievanRus is the medieval state of Eastern Slavs and the predecessor of modern Ukraine, Russia and Belarus between the 9th and 12th centuries. The importance of KievanRus has been mentioned many times by the presidents of Russia (Putin, 2013b). Moreover, in 2013, Putin and Yanukovich celebrated the 1,025th anniversary of the conversion to Christianity of KievanRus (RFE/RL, 2013). Bogomolov and Lytvynenko argue that for Russia, Ukraine is 'more than a foreign policy priority; it is an existential imperative' (2012). Moreover, to many elites, the country is seen as 'part of their country's own identity' (2012) rather than being a 'foreign space'. Thus, Russian leaders' perceptions of greater civilization and Russian culture were betrayed by Ukraine's intentions to join the EU. After the 2004 Orange Revolution this was articulated in a different way. Shnirelman argues, for instance, that part of the Russian myth is being the 'elderly brother'. This myth considers Russians as civilizers 'who were obliged to share their material and intellectual resources generously with all non-Russians, who were treated as relatively backward' (Shnirelman, 2009, 137). Thus, this nationalist discourse and the emphasis of Russia's greatness not only allowed the Russian state to increase its control in

the post-soviet space, but also aimed to mobilise the Russian nation under the umbrella of great Russia. But this was interrupted in 2004, 2010 and 2014.

It should be noted that the perception towards Ukrainians as a Little Brother within Greater Russia, and the importance of KievanRus, have been emphasised by Russian leaders many times and this kind of understanding has an impact on Russian foreign policy. For instance, in 2009, Putin, then Prime Minister, visited Anton Denikin's grave in Moscow and told journalists to read his diaries (Marson, 2009; Palmer 2009). The important point about this speech was his reference to Ukraine as 'Little Russia'. Putin said: 'He (Denikin) has a discussion there about Big Russia and Little Russia — Ukraine. He says that no one should be allowed to interfere in relations between us; they have always been the business of Russia itself' (Marson, 2009).

This is why Ukraine (which is culturally, politically and historically bonded with Russia) is not seen as a different space in Russian society and not mentioned as a foreign space in the political discourse of the Russian presidents and elites. For instance, Putin gave an interview to Channel One and the Associated Press on September 3rd. In this interview he stated that:

You know, no matter what happens, and wherever Ukraine goes, anyway we shall meet sometime and somewhere. Why? Because we are one nation...As far as this part of Ukraine is concerned, it is a territory and we understand and remember that we were born, as I said, from the unified Ukrainian Dnieper baptistery, Russia was born there and we all come from there (Putin, 2013c).

In his article 'Deconstructing Putin on Ukraine' Motyl analyses Putin's speech and how he referred to Ukraine as a land not a territory. He argues that 'Putin comes across believing that Ukraine is just a place, populated by people who resemble Russians, and not an independent state with a national identity of its own' (Motyl, 2013). This perception underpins Russia's attitude towards Ukraine.

According to Tor Bukkvoll, Russia has never fully recognised the independence of Ukraine, which has affected its foreign policy towards the country (Yafimava, 2011 p. 142). Especially

among Russian communists and radical nationalists, Ukrainian independence has been perceived as a temporary development (Bukkvoll, 2001, 1142).

Russian perceptions towards Ukraine became more obvious after the NATO-Russia Summit in Bucharest in April 2008, as the cable noted the conversation between Bush and Putin. The cable recorded: 'You don't understand George that Ukraine is not even a state' (Marson, 2009) 'What is Ukraine? Part of its territories is Eastern Europe, but the greater part is a gift from us' Putin told Bush who supports Ukraine's membership to NATO (Marson, 2009). The perception of not seeing Ukraine as a sovereign country or as a country that has been given by Russia had an effect on the natural gas policy when the two countries disagreed on the prices of natural gas. At the same meeting, Putin further stated that 'the Crimea was simply given to Ukraine by a decision of the Politburo of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee. There haven't even been any state procedures regarding the transfer of the territory, since we take a very calm and responsible approach to the problem' (Kyiv Post 2010).

In 2009, Medvedev wrote a letter to Yushchenko accusing the leader of being 'anti -Russian'. In his letter, he says that Ukraine is 'to sever existing economic ties with Russia, primarily in the field of energy' and 'further efforts are being made to remove the Russian language from public life, science, education, culture, mass media and courts' (BBC, 2009; Russia Today, 2009). In an article, Putin stated:

Russia can and must play a deserving role, dictated by its civilizational model, great history, geography, and its cultural genome, which seamlessly combines the fundamentals of European civilization and the centuries-old experience of cooperation with the East, where new centres of economic power and political influence are currently rapidly developing (Putin, 2012d).

This kind of reference to 'developing Russian civilization' has also been seen as his 'new ideology' by other scholars (Panarin, 2012).

CONCLUSION

In his Address to the Federal Assembly in 2014, Putin referred to people in Crimea as ‘our people’ and emphasised the civilizational importance of Crimea and Sevastopol. The discourse on the myth of civilizational and greatness of Russia become more obvious with the annexation of Crimea, but we have also observed this in presidential speeches and articles since 2000. After 2000, the main purpose of the new state had been to revive the greatness of Russian culture and spiritual values. As Russian culture and Russian civilization were seen as the unifying force, so language, culture and Christianity were seen as the main indicators. This article argues that the discourse of civilizational nationalism is crucial in understanding Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine. As this paper draws upon a historical institutionalist framework, it claims that the civilizational nationalism and superiority of Russian civilization have been adopted by the Russian leadership as guiding principles which provide a way of structuring the state in order to establish stability within the country. But centring Russian culture at the core of Russian civilization, and defining Russians as natural builders of state power, is a claim that has been utilised by the Russian state to provide intervention in other countries.

This form of nationalism embedded in formal/informal structures and the Russian state was configured as the main protector of this civilization. The Russian leaders have utilised the discourse of civilizational nationalism to ‘unify’ the nations of post-soviet regions, particularly Ukraine, under the umbrella of great Russian culture, language and 1000 years of history. The leaders often referred to ‘Russian people’ in civic terms (*Rossiiskii*), but, as we have seen after the annexation of Crimea, Putin used *Ruskii* in his reference to people in Crimea. The state proposed sovereign democracy which reframes the importance of the cultural superiority. The state, as the main protector of this superiority, also proposed state civilization which would unite all ethnic groups in Russia only with a common language and common culture. In the

case of the Maidan crisis, Ukraine's efforts to be part of the EU were seen as a betrayal to Russian leaders' perception of constructing a greater Russian civilization where Russians are going to be the core of them all.

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