One Russia, Many Worlds:

Balancing External Homeland Nationalism

and Internal Ethnocultural Diversity

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Abstract

For many years, issues of diversity management in post-Cold War Central and Eastern Europe (including Russia) were viewed through the prism of the multilateral minority rights 'regime' developed through the OSCE, Council of Europe and EU. In so far as all OSCE participating states asserted the importance of the concept during the early 1990s, minority rights came to be considered as a shared political field with the capacity to transcend competing nationalisms within CEE. Inevitably, however, this field encompassed widely varying and competing definitions of 'minority rights' and was created in a context of unequal power relations between West and East. Over the past decade or more, Russia - never wholly embedded within this concept of normative space – has increasingly challenged the multilateral framework rhetorically and in policy practice, as part of a more general shift towards bilateralization of minority issues and their instrumentalization by 'kin-state' actors within the region. Using new empirical findings from a 2014-17 project on practices of national-cultural autonomy (NCA) within Russia, this article demonstrates how today's Russian state – hailing its own approach to diversity management as superior to that of the West – increasingly seeks to coopt minority NCA bodies in Russia not only for domestic purposes but also in the service of external policy and geopolitical competition. Using data from interviews with NCA representatives, however, the article points to only limited success in this regard and assesses what implications this might hold for the future course of ethnic relations within Russia.

Keywords: Russia, nationalism, Russkii Mir, minorities, minority rights, national-cultural autonomy

Introduction

Over the course of the past decade, multiple developments (economic crisis, population displacement, regional conflicts, geopolitical rivalries) have led to an increased securitization of ethnocultural diversity across the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian space. "An extraordinary pan-European (and trans-Atlantic) populist conjuncture" (Brubaker 2017, 1191) has combined with more "traditional" forms of nationalism to test the social cohesion of individual states and the legitimacy of the European Union and other international organizations (Council of Europe, OSCE) committed to accommodating diversity according to principles of liberal pluralism and minority rights. One key focus of concern within this context has been Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine, which have gone hand-in-hand with Russian leaders' distancing from liberal norms and institutions and their increasing promotion of a transnational "Russian World" (*Russkii Mir*) (Suslov 2017, 25). For many commentators, this was taken as confirming earlier predictions that Russia would shift inexorably from a "civic" (*Rossiiskii*) to an "ethnic" (*Russkii*) mode of nation-building and espouse an activist and very likely irredentist "external homeland" (Brubaker 1996) or "transsovereign" (Csergő and Goldgeier 2004) nationalism predicated on defense of ethnic "kin" living beyond the borders of the state. Evidence for such a view can be found in Vladimir Putin's March 18 address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, in which he characterized the Crimean annexation as an act undertaken in defense of "the *Russian nation* … [-] … one of the biggest, if not the biggest *ethnic group* in the world to be divided by borders" (Putin 2014).

Talk of contemporary Russia as an ethnonationalist 'kin-state', however, overlooks the fact that the current Russian polity is itself highly diverse and (ostensibly) multinational and federal, shaped by the preceding experience of the USSR and the longer-term legacies of empire. As Putin's March 2014 speech exemplifies very well, Russia's contemporary leadership indeed deploys the "ethnic card" in policy towards the former Soviet "Near Abroad". In so doing, however, it is presented with a dilemma, for such moves might easily disrupt ethno-political stability or even potentially foment separatist tendencies within Russia itself (Suslov 2017, 28). As Mikhail Suslov (2017, 6) observes, "wherever imperialism has left its mark, national categories are problematic". In the case of Russia, this can be readily illustrated with reference to the opaque and in many ways "purposefully ambiguous" (Shevel 2011) term "compatriot" (*sootechestvennik*), which, having long formed the basis for efforts to define diaspora engagement policy, has now largely been superseded by the Russian World concept. This and other recent scholarship tells us that a reliance on traditional binaries of civic and ethnic nationalism is of limited utility for explaining the case of contemporary Russia, obscuring the complexities of a post-Soviet identity-building project that has been not so much *national* as statist and (increasingly) neo-imperialist and *civilizational* in character (Laruelle 2015, Pain 2016, Tsygankov 2017). While Russian language and culture undoubtedly sit at the core of the *Russkii mir* concept, the *Russkii* identity itself is diffuse, having historically denoted claims of unity between the Eastern Slavic peoples (Laruelle 2015). Moreover, it has been opened up to provide space for members of other ethnic groups that subscribe to the values promoted by the Kremlin (Blakkisrud 2016, 267; Makarychev & Yatsyk 2018, 454).

The existing literature mainly focuses on the external dimensions and implications of *Russkii Mir* as a discourse and policy designed to build "trans-national and cross-border communities" identifying themselves with Russia; less attention has been paid to how this concept operates domestically, "as a toolkit for securing a greater coherence and cohesiveness of Russia trans-ethnic political community" (Makarychev & Yatsyk 2018, 454-455). Work by Marlene Laruelle (2015, 88) outlines how Putin's statist regime has more or less effectively coopted and "neutralized" ethnic Russian nationalists that were seen to threaten the existing political order. The present article, however, focuses on another, lesser-explored, dimension that is of relevance both to Russia's internal cohesion and to its external interaction with post-Cold multilateral frameworks for diversity accommodation – namely, the question of whether the regime has also been able to co-opt non-Russian elites in support of its "state civilization" project. The article is based on empirical research carried out during 2014-17, which explored how domestic and international factors have combined to shape processes of state-and nation-building in Russia since the 1990s, as well as the extent to which current arrangements offer space for participation by non-dominant, non-Russian nationalities.[1] The research brought to light growing attempts to control and coordinate the work of non-Russian ethnic organizations since 2012, raising the question of how spokespersons for non-Russian nationalities have responded: have they operated within a dominant state discourse that frames nationality issues as a matter of top-down management, or have they sought to push back and assert their own autonomy and agency in relation to the state? In this regard, do minority rights frameworks - promoted by international organizations but dismissed by the Russian government - serve as a continued point of reference? The article begins by briefly sketching the overall conceptual framework for the research project, before outlining how Russia has shifted from initially working within the international minority rights paradigm to actively challenging it, by eschewing multilateralism and presenting its own nationalities policy as inherently superior to approaches employed in the liberal West. The perspective of different non-Russian ethnic elites regarding these developments is then explored, followed by some concluding reflections.

States and Minority Politics in Post-Communist Europe

Conceived amidst the collapse of the USSR and former Yugoslavia, Rogers Brubaker's now seminal work *Nationalism Reframed* exemplified a growth in post-Cold War scholarship focusing on the historic institutionalization of ethno-cultural nationhood as a social category within Central and East Europe (Slezkine 1994; Martin 2001). The main intention behind Brubaker's work was actually to warn against reifying nationhood and treating as "categories of analysis what are in fact categories of *practice*" and the product of contingent and fluctuating political fields (Brubaker 1996). In positing a dynamic three-way interaction ("triadic nexus") between ethnoculturally-defined "nationalizing state", "national minority" and "external national homeland" nationalisms, he emphasized that the "national struggles" of the late and immediate post-communist period "were and are not the struggles of nations, but the struggle of institutionally constituted national elites" (Brubaker 1996, 25). This approach is indeed highly instructive for understanding how competing ethnopolitical entrepreneurs use the category of "nation"

instrumentally in pursuit of particular ends. At the same time – as Brubaker (2011) himself later hinted – his work arguably reinforced a tendency to "over-ethnicize" the study of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, while presenting ethno-cultural diversity in securitized terms, as an obstacle to state integrity and cohesion (see also: Csergő 2008). In this respect, he famously observed that "the successor states to the Soviet Union are still incipient states. Their juridical independence has been secured but their sociological 'stateness' remains to be established. The form of their statehood, even the fact of their durable statehood, is not yet settled. They are states-in-the-making" (Brubaker 1996, 43).

Within this frame, moreover, Brubaker's primary concern was with the non-Russian successor polities to the USSR, which were characterized as ethnoculturally-defined "nationalizing states". In so far as Russia figured in the analysis, it was primarily as a likely incubator for a dominant ethnocultural "external homeland" nationalism that would in turn fundamentally affect politics within neighboring states containing sizeable Russian and Russophone minorities. Drawing an explicit parallel between 1990s Russia and Weimar Germany, Brubaker (1996: 54) predicted that "deeply rooted and powerfully conflicting expectations of belonging – interacting … with conflicts of interest engendered by state-building, regime change, and economic restructuring – will make the dynamic interplay between non-Russian successor states, Russian minorities, and the Russian state a locus of … potentially explosive, ethno-national conflict in coming years". Brubaker paid less attention to the dynamics of state-minority relations within Russia itself, though he and other contemporaries did posit that the ethno-federal structure inherited from the Soviet period might generate nationalizing tendencies at the level of individual national republics. As will be demonstrated later in this article, such fears were indeed very much present in the mind of Russian policymakers during the early 1990s, when events in Chechnya and the more general context of "asymmetrical federalism" raised questions about the longer-term stability of the Russian state. The fact that these fears have ultimately proved exaggerated warrants closer attention as to how Russia has managed its internal ethnic diversity over the past three decades, as well as bringing into focus the interplay between the fields of domestic nation-building and external homeland nationalism.

According to many subsequent authors, Brubaker's analysis also missed out a key "conceptual player" (Pettai 2006, 127) shaping political developments across the states of post-communist eastern Europe and Eurasia –namely, international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), Conference on (later Organization for) Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Council of Europe (CoE) (Smith 2002; Tesser 2003, Galbreath 2004, Kelley 2004; Budryte 2005). In response to the ethnic tensions and conflicts that emerged in parts of the region at the beginning of the 1990s, these organizations sought to devise new international legal standards geared to the democratic accommodation of ethnic diversity within and between states. Initially pursued under the auspices of OSCE (at that time the only regional multilateral framework uniting states across the former Iron Curtain) these efforts were quickly matched by CoE as it expanded its reach into Central and Eastern Europe and the former USSR. The various instruments devised by these organizations are ostensibly designed to transcend the competing poles of Brubaker's "triadic nexus", by protecting and empowering individuals belonging to national minorities and furthering their integration with the political life of the state-based political communities of which they form part.[2] Taking their cue from these initiatives, the European Union (EU) also listed "respect for

and protection of minorities" as one of its accession criteria for applicant countries, while also enshrining it within external relations frameworks such as the European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership. Against this background, it has become difficult to understand the politics of state- and nation-building within particular post-communist states without reference to the external role of these international organizations, a fact which led David Smith (2002) to suggest that one should speak of a "quadratic" rather than simply a "triadic" nexus shaping the region's development (See also: Cheskin 2014, Kallas 2016; Schulze 2018).

Yet, while all OSCE participating states declared the importance of minority rights in the early 1990s, a unified normative framework stretching "from Vancouver to Vladivostok" has not subsequently emerged. In so far as all of the relevant organizations are intergovernmental in character, post-Cold War international minority rights approaches have remained resolutely state centric (Nancheva 2016; Csergő & Regelmann 2017; Smith, Germane and Housden 2019). Accordingly, no single, agreed definition of "national minority" or legally binding set of minority rights provisions has emerged. Rather like the nodes of Brubaker's original "triadic nexus," contemporary minority rights approaches can be conceptualized as the product of a contingent and contested political field in which various actors (but first and foremost representatives of states) vie to advance different understandings and agendas (Smith 2002). The European minority rights regime thus consists of "ambiguously formulated" (Dembinska et al 2014, 204) declarations and conventions setting out non-juridically enforceable "minimum standards" (Kymlicka 2007b, 44). Within this framework, as Graham Smith observed already in 1999, states have faced no real international pressure to "affirm multicultural rights" (Smith 1999, 515-516; see also: Agarin & Cordell 2016; Csergő & Regelmann 2017) and only limited pressure to uphold the minimum standards all have been able to agree on.[3] The legitimacy of this framework has been further undermined by the continued insistence of some longer-standing OSCE and CoE members that they either have no "national" minorities at all, or no national minority issues requiring attention (Burgess 1999; Chandler 1999). The main thrust of minority policy has thus been directed towards the states of Central and Eastern Europe, fostering resentment and accusations of double standards (Johns 2003; Tesser 2003).

Until 2004, those countries aspiring to NATO and EU membership were willing to accept this state of affairs and go along with external minority rights demands in return for the economic and security gains promised by joining these organizations (Kymlicka 2007a). With effective EU leverage having ceased once these countries became full EU members, however, policy backsliding has been evident, especially following the start of the 2008 economic crisis. The fact that the demands for greater security expressed by those countries were directed primarily against a perceived external threat from Russia also testifies to the continued geopolitical lines of division that have marked the OSCE area since 1991. Russia is a member of OSCE and joined CoE during the 1990s but has had no membership perspective as far as the EU and NATO are concerned. The EU has spoken of "partnership" with Russia based on adherence to a common framework of liberal democratic norms; as discussed further below, however, the ruling post-Soviet elite in Russia has increasingly framed the relationship with the West in realist, sphere of influence terms, emphasizing Russia's historic great power identity and eschewing multilateralism in favor of multipolarity. This trend has intensified in the face of the rising authoritarianism apparent since

Vladimir Putin first came to power in 2000, when continued eastward engagement by the EU beyond its enlarged 2004/2007 borders has been securitized as a likely precursor to further NATO enlargement and/or an instrument of regime change. The relationship has shifted towards one of growing estrangement during the past decade, with Putin's third and fourth terms of office having become synonymous with attempts to accentuate and reinforce identity boundaries between Russia and the "West" broadly defined.

Thus, while the EU and other international organizations have unquestionably been important players within the region, their influence has been mediated not only by the domestic political configurations that exist within individual states (Kelley 2004; Galbreath & McEvoy 2012; Schulze 2018), but also by perceptions of the state's geostrategic situation held by elites (Mylonas 2013; Dembinska et al 2014). To understand practices of diversity management within particular states, it is therefore necessary to analyze how international minority rights frameworks predicated on liberal multiculturalism interact with institutional legacies of the communist past that are shaped by essentialized understandings of ethnicity and inherited legacies of top-down control (Cordell, Agarin & Osipov 2013). The broader research project from which this article derives sought to investigate this interaction through the prism of debates and practices surrounding national cultural autonomy (NCA – also known as non-territorial autonomy), which has formed the basis for minority legislation implemented by several Central and East European states since 1991. NCA is interesting because it has been highlighted as a potentially promising approach by international actors (especially during the 1990s),[4] but is also a model historically *endogenous* to Central and Eastern Europe itself. In most of the cases considered by the project, discussions of NCA legislation began already during the late communist period, before the countries in question began substantive engagement with international organizations. The research therefore investigated how domestic and international factors combined to shape NCA arrangements in different settings, with a focus on the different understandings of "autonomy" advanced by political elites within the process.

A further central aim of the project was to explore the practice of NCA from the specific standpoint of minority actors in the countries concerned: how, for instance, have their understandings of autonomy been shaped by inherited domestic institutional legacies on the one hand and external international norms on the other? What has been their practical experience of working within NCA structures and how adequate do they consider current arrangements to be in satisfying their claims? The period in which the research was carried out coincided with growing academic and political interest in the perspectives of minority communities in CEE, but primarily of those linked to an external "kin-state". This in turn reflects a growing trend towards bilateral and unilateral kin-state engagement with co-nationals abroad which has challenged multilateral frameworks established by OSCE HCNM and Council of Europe during the 2000s. One obvious example of this was the move to extend citizenship to Hungarians abroad by a Fidesz-led government in Hungary that has increasingly espoused ethnopopulism since 2010. A far more egregious instance was Russia's 2014 intervention in Ukraine, which has given rise to a raft of studies focusing on how Russian-speaking minorities in the neighboring states of the region relate to Russia and the "Russian World" (Kallas 2016; Cheskin and Kachuyevskii 2019).

Rather less attention has been paid to the position of minorities *within* self-proclaimed kin states, all of which are themselves ethnically diverse to different degrees. There has been previous discussion of how Hungary's 1993 law on national minorities, through its provision for collective rights to autonomy, was conceived as a means of exerting greater external leverage on neighboring states containing Hungarian minorities (Kovats 1997; Ieda 2006). However, the actual substance (or otherwise) and impact of minority autonomy within Hungary has been an issue of secondary concern compared to the external kin-minority dimension, all the more so as government policies have shifted in an ever more ethnonationalist and externally assertive direction over the past decade (Molnar Sansum & Dobos (2019). This can be attributed at least partly to the fact that national minorities make up a numerically insignificant share of the population in Hungary, which is often portrayed as a homogenous nation-state where a dominant titular elite could grant autonomy without incurring significant political costs (Waterbury 2010). What though, of Russia, which is far more ethnically diverse?

Today's Russian Federation – it is generally agreed – is "federal" in name only. In this regard, Putin's ability to deploy an ethnicized discourse of "divided Russian nation" for external purposes owes much to a foregoing domestic centralization of power that has effectively curbed any prospect of a challenge from non-Russian ethnic elites at the sub-state level. At the same time, the research on which this article is based demonstrated the continued importance that the ruling authorities attach to the concept of Russia as a multinational state. The interviews carried out with representatives of NCAs, national republics and ethnic NGOs also highlighted increasing efforts by the state to coopt non-Russian minority institutions in support not only of domestic but also external policy objectives framed by notions of geopolitical competition with the West. In this context, Russia has been portrayed as a unique multi-ethnic civilization whose own approach to accommodating diversity is superior to the allegedly failing multicultural frameworks employed by a liberal West deemed to be in the throes of crisis and decay. Minority organizations within Russia have been encouraged to endorse this official portrayal of Russia and, in some cases, also to utilize links with co-ethnic "kin" abroad in support of objectives set by the state. The remainder of this article discusses Russia's approach to the governance of diversity, tracing its evolution from a (reluctant) minority rights "norm-taker" during the 1990s to an aspiring "norm-maker" in the 2010s and assessing how non-Russian minority elites have perceived the context in which they are operating.

Domestic and International Influences on Russian Nation-Building

During the earliest phase of the Russian Federation's existence, its leadership was guided by an "Atlanticist" concept of state- and nation-building which emphasized partnership with the West, transition to democracy and the construction of a civic "new Russian nationalism." (Jonson 1994; Melvin 1995) Within this initial framework, the large ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking communities living in the neighboring successor states to the Former Soviet Union were explicitly understood as national *minorities* - that is to say, foreign citizens who would undergo integration into the new polities of which they formed part and obtain guarantees of their rights under the new emerging international instruments for minority protection (Kolsto 1995; Laitin 1998). When an Estonian – Russian inter-state

treaty was signed in January 1991, for instance, Stanislav Stystovii of the Human Rights Committee of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet observed that 'I do not think that Estonia will be worse than any of the *European countries* about which no questions are asked regarding *minority populations*' (cited in Virov 1991).From the outset, this "integrationist" course was challenged by domestic opposition forces that brought together radical nationalists and anti-Western advocates of Russia as a great power. Already by the mid-1990s it had been supplanted by a "moderate nationalist" or "democratic statist" discourse fusing "western liberalism and neo-nationalism" (G. Smith 1999b, 63) and seeking:

"to combine cooperation with competition in international affairs. It views Russia as, by right, a great European power, one that wishes cooperation with Europe, … but is accompanied by a special sensitivity to the maintenance of its sovereignty, autonomy and special, great power status. In domestic affairs, the moderate nationalists tended to be technocratic and pragmatic. In foreign relations they were self-styled 'realists', embracing balance-of-power, realpolitik theories of international organisation" (Breslauer 2003, 27).

The challenge to the Atlanticist course marked the first references to a community of "compatriots" (*sootchestvenniki*) beyond Russia's borders that the state had the right and the duty to defend. A range of possible definitions can, however, be applied to this term, the use of which has, in Shevel's (2011) words, remained "purposefully ambiguous". The commitment to defend these "compatriots", moreover, remained largely rhetorical until the start of the 2000s (Suslov 2017). Efforts were made to instrumentalize Russian minorities abroad for geostrategic ends, but Russia was not prepared to prejudice relations with the West over this issue. For instance, in the case of Estonia and Latvia, which became central to the discourse of defending compatriots abroad, Moscow attempted to exert pressure on these countries indirectly through international organizations, seeking to exploit, in Brubaker's (1996) words, "transborder concern for human rights." In so doing it highlighted in particular the alleged double standards of Western governments that criticized Russia's actions in Chechnya while turning a blind eye to rights violations in countries (like the Baltic States) that were being embraced as future members of the European Union and NATO. In this respect, Iver Neumann (1999) argues that Russia's rhetoric sought to portray these countries as embodiments of a "false Europe" that did not abide by the norms set by the EU and other Western organizations.

As the reference to Chechnya underlines, however, the Russian government was far more preoccupied with domestic issues than it was with foreign policy during the early 1990s. To what extent, then, did emerging international debates on minority rights influence its approach to diversity accommodation, especially the 1996 adoption of an NCA model that found reference in early OSCE documents and had by that time already been adopted by Hungary? Bill Bowring (2013, 54) points out that the NCA law has been routinely referred to in Russia's periodic reporting to the Council of Europe under the terms of the FCNM. Bowring's (2013, 54-55) discussion of minority protection in Russia, as well as the interviews later conducted for our project show that the 1996 law arose out of domestic debates starting during the *perestroika* period in which non-Russian political elites were themselves able to participate actively. In this context, "the experience of foreign countries" (RUS.1.14.anon. 2016) was actively considered and NCA identified as "the highest expression in the field of nation-building in contemporary Europe" (RUS.1.9. 2016). This view was encapsulated by a respondent in Tatarstan, who claimed that, in 1995:

"the regime was different, and Russia was possibly quite sincere in its aspirations for democracy and well-being of its nationalities. ... Even if some politicians did not care much about the peoples living in Russia, they wanted to demonstrate something, to show off in front of the West. That they are as civilized as Europeans are, at least in formal terms" (RUS.3.3.anon. 2015).

Most commentators agree, however, that Russia's approach to nationality issues was shaped less by Western models than it was by legacies of Soviet ethno-territorial federalism. The immediate context for the adoption of NCA was the political instability of the early 1990s, when practices of "asymmetrical federalism" under Yel'tsin prompted fears that individual national republics would pursue their own sub-state nationalizing projects that might destabilize and possibly threaten the territorial integrity of the Federation. As one respondent observed, "the thing is that back in 1996, when the law was adopted, the national policy was not regulated. That was the time of mobilized ethnicity; the Caucasus was boiling, republics, including Bashkiria, adopted declarations of national sovereignty. Centrifugal tendencies were quite strong in the regions at that time" (RUS.1.16. 2016). Already during the democratizing debates of the late 1980s, NCA had been floated by radical Russian reformers as a possible catch-all alternative to the Soviet ethno-territorial model. The attention given to NCA increased during the early 1990s, in part because (in the words of one respondent) "the door was opened to contacts with the West; American colleagues working on federalism all said 'you have ethnic federalism', republics with an ethnic designation, and thus you will collapse." This Western influence, it was said, "filtered through", not least via the person of Valerii Tishkov, who, as a leading academic expert on the issue and Minister for Nationalities during 1992, is especially associated with advancing the NCA concept (RUS.3.13. 2015).

To propose the wholesale replacement of ethno-territorial federalism with a system of NCA was clearly not politically feasible in the context of the mid-1990s. This, though, was never the intention. Rather, it was believed that introducing NCA as a *complement* (rather than alternative) to the existing ethno-territorial structure would bolster identification with the state on the part of dispersed non-titular nationalities that had not been assigned a designated territorial unit within the wider state (Codagnone & Filippov 2000, 276-278; Tolz 2001, 251). This would forestall demands for the restoration of autonomous territories (for instance, the Volga German Republic) abolished during the Stalinist period and, as already noted, guard against the potential emergence of destabilizing nationalizing policies within individual territorial units of the Federation (RUS.3.6. 2015). This belief can be seen as well-founded in so far as the NCA model seemed consonant with the aspirations voiced by spokespersons for many of the smaller more dispersed nationalities living across the Federation. Furthermore, once the leaders of Russia's existing national republics had got beyond the suspicion that NCA was intended to replace the ethno-territorial structure altogether, they too saw that this model might help to strengthen the integrity and legitimacy of individual territorial subjects within the Federation. As a representative of a Tatar organization in Bashkortostan noted in an interview in May 2016, "this institution (NCA) does not displease the regional authorities, because it makes no claims against the territorial integrity of this or that subject and is concerned only with the preservation of national culture. In this respect it does not provoke an allergic reaction on the part of the regional authorities". Indeed, our interview data suggest that, far from being "nationalizing", individual republics of the Federation (e.g. Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Yakutia) were already undertaking their own local initiatives in the area of diversity governance at

the very start of the 1990s, initiatives which often fed into and informed the conception of nationalities policy developed at the overall state level in the middle of that same decade (RUS.1.4.ru. 2015).[5]

With hindsight, the widespread fears of ongoing centrifugal nationalism within Russia following the Soviet collapse appear exaggerated (Gorenburg 2003; Giuliano & Gorenburg 2012). The political instability of the early 1990s nevertheless left a deep imprint, fostering a preoccupation with strengthening the central institutions of state power. In this setting, the NCA concept introduced in 1996 was clearly shaped by top-down logics of cooptation and control similar to those that had characterized the previous Soviet system. According to one of our respondents, "the decision to establish national-cultural autonomies was an attempt to … find constructive and strong partners and separate them from sole protesters voicing all kinds of demands; … to bring together radical and more constructive organizations and make them *fight against each other*, not with the state" (RUS.1.10. 2016). The concept and application of NCA in Russia has also been closely associated with essentialized understandings of ethnicity inherited from the Soviet period, when "nationalities" were perceived as internally homogeneous groups (Osipov 2010). In a similar vein, one academic expert noted that "for the authorities it's easier to interact with one 'principal Jew', one 'principal Armenian', one 'principal Russian German'. ... There is an *ethnos*, a nation as some kind of collective body with one head (or maybe two heads), but this is a very fundamentalist, positivistic view of ethnicity" (RUS.3.6. 2015). State-minority interactions, meanwhile, continue to be framed in Soviet terms, as a question of preservation and "development" of non-Russian cultures, rather than one of addressing issues of discrimination or underlying structural inequalities. NCA bodies thus lacked both clearly-defined legal competences and guaranteed resources. Reflecting on the debates of the early 1990s, a representative of an NCA noted that:

"despite talk of the 'European way' [*Evropeiskii put'*], the European level of NCA, I also heard the opposite view from the juridical-political side of Russia. They voiced the thesis that NCA cannot raise political issues. Other types of public organisations can raise them, but these can't. Culture, culture, and only culture, and not a step further!" **(**RUS.1.9. 2016).

From the standpoint of the authorities, then, it appears that NCA was regarded not as a mechanism for minority empowerment, but as a matter of top-down diversity *management*, in which the objectives of individuals and communities were to be aligned as closely as possible with those of the state.

State efforts to coordinate the activities of non-Russian minority elites have intensified during the three terms of centralizing (and increasingly authoritarian) presidential rule by Vladimir Putin, who has prioritized themes of a strong state and national unity. Putin's 2012 pronouncements on the "nationality question," as well as the subsequent "Strategy for State Nationality Policy for the Period up to 2025" advance the vision of a multi-ethnic but Russian-led civic nation. Above all, however, they prioritize identification with the Russian state, as a great power (*derzhava*) and core of a traditional civilization spanning the Eurasian landmass and encompassing Russia's compatriots, however defined (Putin 2012). This "middle way" formula (Blakkisrud 2016, 268) is intended to coopt non-Russian ethnic elites while simultaneously neutralizing the threat of Russian ethnic nationalism, which has manifested itself in growing violence against new immigrants from the South Caucasus and Central Asia and calls for direct

state intervention on behalf of ethnic Russians living in neighboring countries (Laruelle 2015; Tsgankov 2016). As part of the new nationalities concept, NCA bodies representing Russia's (already long-established) Caucasian and Central Asian minority communities have been assigned the new social task of assisting in the "integration" of new migrants from these regions. This again underlines the essentialist understanding of ethnicity inherited from the Soviet past – the idea that, regardless of individuals' origins or circumstances, there is a single homogenous ethnic group whose leaders have a responsibility to maintain order on behalf of the state.

In 2013, Putin argued that a strong and united national identity was central not just to future economic growth and prosperity but also to achieving *geopolitical* influence (Putin 2013). In this respect, the inherently fuzzy relationship between state and nationhood at the core of official narratives on identity affords flexibility and room for maneuver in external as well as internal affairs. The concept of *Russkii Mir*, for instance, can be used in a narrowly "ethnic" sense in certain contexts (as was the case with the 2014 annexation of Crimea), whereas in other cases the "divided nation" can also be a Soviet one' (Laruelle 2015, 294) - in other words, framing Russian identity in terms of a multiethnic, transnational civilization can (depending on the context) be deployed in support of efforts to reintegrate the former Soviet space under Russian auspices. Such efforts have indeed been taking shape over the past 20 years, most notably through the current project of creating a Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) (Tsygankov 2016). In so far as EEU has been couched as distinct from (and incompatible with) the European Union's Eastern Partnership, it also underlines the extent to which today's Russian leadership views relations with the West in terms of geopolitical competition. This tendency was already evident during the mid-late 1990s, when Yevgenii Primakov's doctrine of *multipolarity* challenged a post-Cold War multilateralism that Russia saw as mainly serving the interests of the United States as the dominant world power. Since the mid-2000s, the democratic norms promoted by international organizations (including minority rights) have increasingly been portrayed as cover for a US agenda of extending "regime change" to Russia, thereby weakening and possibly destroying the state (Kymlicka 2007; Tsygankov 2016; Casier & DeBardeleben 2018). One sign of this was the introduction of the 2012 foreign agents law which –among other things – has greatly reduced possibilities for NCAs and other ethnic organizations to receive financial support from external "kin-states" committed to supporting their cultural development.

Sensing the threat to its own power posed by the 2014 ousting of President Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine, and seeking to exploit growing populist nationalism and the refugee crisis in the European Union, members of Russia's ruling elite have become increasingly vocal in repudiating Western models of diversity governance and hailing Russia's own approach in this area as superior. A good illustration can be found in opening remarks delivered on behalf of President Putin by Alexander Zhuravsky, Deputy Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation, at the 2016 World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples held in Lahti, Finland in June 2016 and attended by the author. Starting with the Strategy on State Ethnic Policy and the question of why Russia pays such close attention to issues of diversity governance, Zhuravsky stated that it does so:

"not because we are worse than our neighbours. No, we are doing a lot better on the cultural and national issues than most countries of the world. The unresolved migration problem in Europe is a proof of that, as well as the

complexity of integrating foreign cultural communities migrating to Europe as well as a European identity crisis and a crisis of multiculturalism. This has been mentioned by many European leaders, including those of Russia, Hungary and Finland" (Zhuravsky 2016).

The strategy for state ethnic policy until 2025, he continued, had been adopted "because preservation and promotion of cultural diversity is not declarative but real politics in our country," reflecting Russia's position as a "civilizational state … whose cultural code organically includes a variety of ethnocultural traditions, including Finno-Ugric ones" (Zhuravsky 2016). In this regard, Zhuravsky drew a contrast between Russia's alleged historically proven capacity to "integrate without assimilation" and the purportedly inferior practices adopted by other European states: noting that Russia had "long been urged" to ratify the Council of Europe's European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, he declared that his government had studied the experience of Sweden, the United Kingdom and Spain in implementing this instrument and had found it "not convincing" (Zhuravsky 2016). Addressing by-now customary criticism towards Estonia (where "the Estonians are facing demographical difficulties, not to mention the problems of human rights protection") for its alleged neglect of the Finno-Ugric Seto minority, Zhuravsky also positioned Russia as "the heart and centre of the Finno-Ugric World," observing *inter alia* that the 1809 creation of the Grand Duchy of Finland had helped to preserve Finnish language and culture and that Finnish independence in 1917 had been achieved "largely due to the decision of the Russian government" (Zhuravsky 2016).

Zhuravsky thus sought to position Russia as a leader in "cultural and national issues" and champion of self-determination, in a way that diminishes and undermines the credibility of Western liberal norms pertaining to diversity accommodation. In this respect, his remarks also painted a positive picture of relations between Russia and Finland while demeaning Estonia (a more outspoken international critic of Russia) as a purportedly failing state. His concluding reference to the Finno-Ugric Association of Russia as "the only nationwide registered organization representing in a legitimate way [the] interests of all of the Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia" and determining "the formation of the official attitude of Russian authorities to different international public projects and initiatives" (Zhuravsky 2016) also highlights increasing efforts by the state to coopt minority NCAs and (controlled) NGOs in support of its external objectives. This emerged as a recurrent theme in our interviews, with one expert (and presidential adviser) noting that the non-Russian "communities" (*obshchiny*) within Russia "are playing a broader role than we anticipated," especially in the sphere of international relations (RUS.3.7. 2015). The respondent in question identified different ways in which minority communities were proving useful to the state: one facet lay in their potential role as economic and political intermediaries between Russia and states (e.g. Kazakhstan) belonging to the EEU.[6] However, the same possibilities were also observed when it came to promoting relations ("politically, not just economically") with EU countries such as Greece (RUS.3.7. 2015).[7]

Minority Perspectives

The question remains, however, of how these efforts at top-down cooptation by the state are perceived at the level of the non-Russian "communities" themselves. In this respect, a mixed picture emerged

from our interviews. Unsurprisingly, statements by public officials we encountered tended to embody the new dominant discourse that rejects the approaches and even the terminology employed by Western liberal democracies. In an interview in October 2015, for instance, an ethnic Tatar official of the Republic of Tatarstan drew a firm line of distinction between Russia and Europe, using the phrase "*u vas v evropi*" ["In Europe you have …"] and declaring "I hate it when Tatars are called a 'minority'. It's not right. No *narod* is a 'minority'." This again demonstrates the continued legacy of a Soviet nationalities policy which stated that all ethnic groups enjoyed equal (symbolic) rights to (cultural) self-determination, regardless of the socio-political and economic disparities that existed between them.

However, in several instances interview respondents working in NGOs and NCAs also subscribed to the official line, as seen in the following statement by a Moscow-based representative of a Mordovian organization:

"I feel no influence and importance of European standards. We have good laws here in Russia and they are enough. Maybe they are beneficial for European countries, but neither me, nor my friends can say that we feel the need to adopt some European norm, which is better functioning in the EU, or to sign some memorandum, no. … The cradle of Finno-Ugric peoples is in Russia. But Estonia or Finland are trying to teach Russia, inquiring about the status of its Finno-Ugric peoples, in this way, trying to take a leadership role in protecting their rights or providing expertise in this issue. … The Association of Finno-Ugric Nationalities is headed by a Mordovian, who is also the mayor of Saransk. So, Saransk has become not only the face of the Mordovian *narod,* but of *all Finno-Ugric peoples*. Foreign people come here, so the support [given] to the town is at very high levels. *Kazan is the face of the Turkic World, and Saransk of the Finno-Ugric World*, and both towns look good" (RUS.1.1. 2015).

The reference to Kazan (capital of the Republic of Tatarstan) as the "face of the Turkic World" is revealing. As the largest and best-resourced of Russia's national republics, Tatarstan has been able to function as a kind of internal "kin-state" for Tatars living dispersed in other parts of the country, providing additional resources towards the operation of NCA institutions in these areas. At the same time, respondents from NCAs and cultural associations sitting within Kazan's *Dom Druzhby Narodov* [House of Peoples' Friendship] presented a positive image of Tatarstan as a site of tolerance and coexistence of different cultures, with one claiming that "everything has been achieved in Tatarstan, at least. I can't go so far as to claim that it's been done across the whole of Russia. It's not been done everywhere, but then the same conditions don't exist everywhere." (RUS.1.4.ru. 2015). Commenting on this, one academic expert observed that:

"they want to present themselves as a showcase of success. … [T]he strategy has worked, and the federal centre recognises their usefulness … [I]n Crimea, for example, where the local Crimean Tatars were hostile to the idea of Crimea becoming a part of Russia, the involvement of the Tatars from Tatarstan was quite instrumental in helping ease those tensions. Because when Crimean Tatars visit Kazan, they see very different living standards, but also they see that there is a great deal more cultural autonomy, ethnic rights, and so on, that they ever had in Ukraine" (RUS.3.10. 2015).

A respondent from the House of People's Friendship in Kazan confirmed the existence of such interactions between Tatarstan and Crimea and supported the state line, claiming that "even among the Crimean Tatars, in five days I had the impression that people want very simple things. They want peace, stability – life is short, you need to manage to raise your children, give them an education, and for this

Crimea has more opportunities with Russia. ... People want to be with those who are strong, who are stable, who are forever. So, I think what happened in Crimea was its evolution" (RUS.1.3. 2015).

Other NCA respondents also described having participated in activities to support the external policy objectives of the state in different spheres. For instance, it was noted that in 2015, against the background of the crisis in Donbas, the German Federal NCA was able to secure participation by a governmental plenipotentiary from Germany in a conference on the German language, which the Russian deputy foreign affairs minister "accidently" also attended. In this way, the NCA body was able to "[influence] inter-state relations and [contribute] to the continuation of work during such difficult times" (RUS.1.10. 2016). In a similar vein, a representative of the Uzbek NCA of the Tatarstan Republic stated that one of the goals of this body was "to ensure that Uzbekistan supports Russia at a time when it is isolated" (RUS.1.8.ru. 2016). Further extending the notion – referenced above - of Russia as the "face of the Turkic world," a respondent from a Turkic minority NGO stated that:

"today in the situation when Russia is under sanctions of the Western countries, we say that we can be a cultural bridge between Russia and Turkic countries, to make more effective economic policies, and we can be useful for the country and for the authorities. And we do not try to be opponents, but partners of the state."

This same respondent referred *inter alia* to constructive cooperation between his organization and the authorities in Chechnya, including on a 2014 international conference in Grozny on the issue of "Terek Turks as a cultural bridge between Chechnya and the Turkic world" (RUS.2.2.anon. 2015).

If one proceeds (as international organizations do) from the standpoint of societal integration, it is fully to be expected that ethnic minority representatives would (while remaining attached to their particular culture) identify primarily with the broader state-based political community of which they form part and seek to uphold and promote its interests. The OSCE HCNM Recommendations on Minorities in Inter-State Relations further allude to the potential role of minorities as bridge-builders between states. If, however, "integration" is taken to imply some degree of empowerment and voice for a minority, one can clearly question the extent to which this applies in today's Russian context, making it apposite to speak of a strategy geared to co-optation and control rather than accommodation of minority elites. As intimated above, some of our NCA and NGO interview respondents subscribed to a dominant regime discourse of restoring order and stability following the disorienting experience of the "wild 1990s," and were content to work within (rather than challenging) the existing system, in an attempt to realise some of the cultural goals important to them. Revealing is this regard was the comment by one such respondent that "Russia was not ready for democracy; democrats were sincere, but they destroyed the economy." (RUS.1.1. 2015). Others, though, expressed open opposition to the system, criticising what they saw as unwelcome pressure and blatant attempts at manipulation on the part of the state authorities and declaring continued support for application of international minority rights standards in a Russian context.[8] Frequently alluded to in this context was the law introduced in 2012 which requires non-profit organizations receiving foreign donations and engaging in what the authorities deem to be "political activity" to register and declare themselves as "foreign agents" and submit to additional scrutiny and audit requirements (State Duma of Russia 2012; Davydov 2019).[9] It was noted that this had caused major problems for minority organizations still keen to receive external funding and guidance

from EU "kin-states" deemed hostile or otherwise undesirable by the Kremlin. One outspokenly critical respondent, for instance, noted that his minority language constituted an obvious instrument for cross-border cooperation. That it was not used in this way was simply against the economic and general state interests of Russia; the authorities, however, were indifferent to this (RUS.1.11.anon. 2015).

Developing this point as part of a more general critique of Russia's nationality policy, this same respondent attributed the official position to:

"some kind of empire mentality – we are great state and everyone must speak Russian. We do not want to learn that [minority] language … "*Rossiiskaya grazhdnanskaya natsiya*" [Russian civic nation]! It's the new historical formulation of *Sovetskii narod*! It's back to the Brezhnev time! So, … rather than discussing how to work with young people and bring them up with [our minority language], - 'that's your problem' they [state officials] say - they wanted to talk about *Rossiiskaya grazhdnanskaya natsiya* and how this idea unites. How does it unite? There is a huge Ukrainian diaspora here – have you asked them how Crimea unites us?" (RUS.1.11.anon. 2015).[10]

Another critical respondent, a representative of a community of Central Asian origin interviewed in April 2016, presented a picture of being squeezed between two authoritarian regimes – one in Russia, and the other in his putative "historic homeland" or "kin-state." Part of an organization in Moscow originally established to represent a long-established diaspora with Russian citizenship, this respondent expressed resentment towards Russia's essentialist conception of ethnicity and its policy of conflating settled citizen communities with more recent labor migrants, the expectation being that existing minority organizations had to assume responsibility for migrants' integration. The same respondent also criticized attempts by the new Federal Agency on Nationalities to use his own and other minority communities as an [external] "political instrument" –for instance, by pressuring them to sign a joint letter condemning Turkey for shooting down a Russian military aircraft in 2016. This individual also spoke of "strategic partnership" between Russia and his country of origin, whereby, in response to an official request from the latter, the Russian authorities had annulled the Russian citizenship of one member of the ethnic community and handed him over to the authorities in the other country. Speaking of his own contacts with the authorities in his country of origin, this respondent claimed to have been told that "if there was a strong, officially registered organization, representing interests of [the relevant national group] in Russia, the Russian government could use it against us." This latter instance, points to how, in the context of the post-imperial, asymmetrical power relationship that exists between Russia and some of the former Soviet republics, the logic of original "triadic nexus" can be reversed – what is ostensibly a "kin-minority" can be instrumentalized by its state of residence against the perceived interests of its "external homeland."

Conclusion

Taking as its cue the growing attention paid to the *Russkii mir* concept since 2014, this article has sought to revisit post-Soviet Russian nation-building and explore the link between the domestic and external dimensions of this process. As an underlying conceptual framework for the analysis, it used the notion of

a "quadratic nexus" linking the interrelationship between state and minority nationalisms in Central and Eastern Europe with the post-Cold War political field of international minority rights standards. The article showed how, within a context of intensified geopolitical and ideational competition with the U.S.-led NATO alliance and the European Union, Russia's leaders have veered towards a more assertive "trans-sovereign" nationalism that challenges the liberal minority rights norms and multilateral frameworks established during the 1990s by international organizations such as the OSCE and Council of Europe. Exemplified most graphically by the annexation of Crimea and the intervention in eastern Ukraine, this development has often been perceived as marking a shift from "civic" to "ethnic" nation-building in Russia. As numerous scholars have suggested, however, *Russkii mir* does not amount to a straightforward ethno-cultural kin-state policy of the kind sketched by Rogers Brubaker in the 1990s. It rather seeks to "construct trans-national and cross-border communities of people identifying with Russia through language, culture, religion, security practices, or political considerations." (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2018, 454) As the lynchpin for these multiple imagined communities, Russia itself is defined as a unique, historically multi-ethnic "state civilization," within which ethnic Russians constitute the binding core (Putin 2012).

In this way, as the present article illustrates, the Russian state has sought to co-opt not only ethnic Russian nationalists, but also non-Russian national elites living within its territory. At a discursive level, providing space for other "Worlds" (Turkic, Finno-Ugric) within the overall civilizational frame of *Russkii mir* is used to position Russia as a leader in diversity management, counterpoised to a Western world whose own purportedly inferior model of multiculturalism is now in crisis. At the same time, as part of a growing trend towards top-down management of ethnic diversity, efforts are made to mobilize non-Russian NCAs and other ethnic organisations in support of interlinked domestic and external political objectives set by the state, such as integrating "co-ethnic" migrants and forging closer ties between Russia and minority communities' external "kin-states" within the former Soviet space and, in some cases, beyond. The new civilizational idea has been fundamentally shaped by the inherited legacies of the Soviet system, which blurred the boundaries between Russian and Soviet identity while simultaneously institutionalizing understandings of Russia as a multinational state. The recognition given to non-Russian cultures, however, appears increasingly symbolic, with a growing emphasis being placed upon the unifying role of the Russian language (Prina 2015). In this regard - as one of the interviewees cited in this article conveyed very eloquently - current policies appear highly reminiscent of those applied in the USSR during the Brezhnev era.

The effectiveness of *Russkii mir* as a means for forging a transnational community within the territory of the former USSR is a topic addressed elsewhere in this special issue. It is clear that, in some contexts outside Russia, the framework offers an important source of legitimation for both ethnic Russian and non-Russian elites. At the same time, other studies show that Russia's purported support for external *sootechestvenniki* has been more rhetorical than substantive (Suslov 2017) and often interpreted as nakedly instrumentalist, even in contexts where the EU and other international organizations have lost credibility due to their own minimalist approach to minority protection (Csergő & Goldgeier 2013; Kallas 2016). In this sense, the civilizational discourse should perhaps still be understood primarily as a means of bolstering the domestic legitimacy of the current regime. The analysis in the present article suggests

that Russia's post-Soviet "stateness" - to use Brubaker's (1996) term – was more robust than many external observers believed at the start of the 1990s and that, today, representatives of NCAs and also many minority NGOs mostly accept the government's rules of engagement and role as decision-maker and operate within an overarching framework of consensus and shared objectives. This highlights the importance of inherited institutional legacies and the condition of "quasi-civil society" shaped by Russia's increasingly authoritarian political context. Given the nature of the political system, however, it is also difficult to assess whether current patterns of engagement with the authorities are rooted in "consentful" as opposed to "dissentful" compliance (Cheskin & March 2015). Research by Alexseev (2016) suggests the former, pointing to widespread support among non-Russian respondents for the idea of building a Russian-led "USSR 2.0" within the former Soviet space. Yet, even if compliance were dissentful, Blakkisrud (2016) claims that Russia's minorities are insufficiently numerous to mount an effective challenge the current state order. This supports earlier work by Malakhov and Osipov (2006), who argue that Russia's ability to sustain a largely symbolic approach to minority recognition points to levels of socio-cultural integration higher than many outsiders routinely suggest. Whatever the case, the complex (and still evolving) nature of Russia's diversity mean that the state will still be obliged to strike a balance between external assertion and internal stability.

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[1] The research was carried out under UK Economic and Social Research Council project "Minority Rights and Democratic Political Community: Practices of Non-Territorial Cultural Autonomy in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe" (grant number ES/L007126/1), which covered Russia, Hungary, Estonia, Serbia and Romania. As related below, it investigated these issues through the lens of national-cultural autonomy (NCA – also known as non-territorial autonomy), which has been applied (or debated) as a basis for diversity accommodation in the countries concerned since the 1990s. In the case of Russia, around 80 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of NCA bodies, minority NGOs, state officials and academic experts. Where respondents gave their consent, interview transcripts were assigned a code ('RUS. …' in reference list) and included in the project dataset deposited with the UK Data Service ('Smith, David J. (2020)' in reference list).

[2] Most notable here are the 1995 CoE Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) and 1992 European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML) (note also the 2001 report by the CoE Venice Commission on kin-state policies), the June 1990 Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE and the OSCE HCNM Lund Recommendations on effective participation of national minorities (1999), Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on minorities in inter-state relations (2008) and Ljubljana Guidelines on the integration of diverse societies (2012).

[3] By "multicultural rights," Smith was referring to "affirmative action policies, consociational political structures, recognition of local diasporic group rights or dual language policy." Instead, minorities were "to be protected through the promotion of individual (as opposed to collective or group) rights."

[4] In this regard, reference to 'autonomy' is contained in the 1990 Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the CSCE and the 1999 OSCE HCNM Lund Recommendations on minority participation in public life.

[5] In an interview in May 2016, a member of a minority NGO (and former NCA representative) also claimed that "Yakutia adopted this law first and only then – Russia. … In Yakutia the Ministry on nationalities and interethnic relation was established in 1994. We organized a Congress of nationalities where the Concept on national policy was adopted. In Russia, it was adopted two years later".

[6] The role assigned to NCA bodies in managing labour migration from Central Asia has already been alluded to above.

[7] Here, reference was made to remarks by a Greek representative within the Presidential Council.

[8] This view was expressed by some persons present at the Finno-Ugric World Congress in Lahti, who challenged (in one instance publicly, in other cases off-the-record) the positive picture painted by Zhuravsky in his opening address to the Congress.

[9] The "foreign agent" designation can now also be applied to individual citizens, under amendments to media and information legislation introduced in December 2019.

[10] Earlier in the interview, this respondent noted that the officials in question had emphasised the importance of the slogan "*Krym nash*" ("Crimea is ours") in building a united Russian civic consciousness among young people of different cultural backgrounds.