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## **Formation of the Russian Civic Nation: Orthodox, Soviet, Russian**

*Abstract.* The transformation of the estate-based Russian Empire into a modern nation state was hastened by the Revolution of 1905, after which a constitution was adopted and institutions of popular democratic representation were introduced. This gradual movement towards civic nationhood was accelerated by the First World War; following the 1917 Revolution, a specific model of a civic nation emerged in the form of the Soviet people. In the USSR, a social state was created that guaranteed citizens' rights and freedoms that were comparatively progressive for the time, including broad participation in the adoption of socially significant decisions. However, history has demonstrated the failure of the Soviet model of common civic identity, which was replaced by conflict-generating class- and ethno-national palliatives. The contradictions inherent in this model arose in the USSR under the rhetoric of internationalism, the fight against Great Russian chauvinism, and especially the concept of the *brotherhood of peoples* (later downgraded to *friendship*), to latently cultivate a set of ethno-national states. The collapse of the Soviet people as forming the basis for a failed civic nation appeared to legitimise the complex of ethnonationalisms that had emerged at that time in the post-Soviet states. The exception is contemporary Russian society, in which the consolidation of the nation takes the paradoxical form of a suppression of civic nationalism and its replacement with imperial-civilisational and pseudo-Soviet rhetoric. As a result, archaic imperial governance practices, once designed for weak (indirect) control over peripheries and colonies that were culturally distinct from the centre, are turned inward towards the former metropolis, legitimising centrifugal tendencies along with questionable political demands by minorities. In the comparative context of post-Soviet states, the Russian Federation represents, at best, a *deferred nation*. As a result, the common civic identity, which should be founded on the culture of the majority (the state-forming people), manifests itself as a spectrum of institutionally entrenched particular identities that conflict with the majority.

*Keywords:* Russian nation; Russian Empire; nationalism; nation-state; Soviet people; multinational people; civic identity; civilisation state, consolidation

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**Introduction.** The historical formation of any nation presupposes a natural rise of civic nationalism, during which a consolidating identity is formed: culture, territory, language, a common past (collective memory), and ideas about sacred symbols (victories, sacrifices, achievements) that distinguish the nation from other communities. Later, an inevitable routinisation and institutionalisation of nationalism occur in the technologies of self-description, upbringing, education, and management of future generations of the consolidated nation. At the same time, the various local cultural traditions, features and characteristics present in the consolidated culture of the nation-state do not disappear. Instead, they become historical foundations for the creation of a broad national identity, maintaining their influence primarily in the private lives of citizens and individual groups, but not in the area of public regulation of social life and political-administrative structure. At the same time, the consolidating civic identity is naturally weakened by the political accentuation of cultural differences within a nation (ethnic, linguistic, religious, class, etc.), along with their search, confirmation, and symbolic capitalisation.

**Russian Empire: Prehistory of a Nation.** Prior to the formation of the nation state, the modern public sphere, and the common civil identity that replaced the feudal-class *ancien régime* that preceded it, one could speak of families, clans, tribes, communities, estates, and ruling dynasties, but not of civil society and the civic nation state in its modern sense. François Guizot surmises that medieval European society “between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries contained everything that we have encountered and described in it: kings, secular aristocracy, clergy, citizens, colonies, religious power, secular power – in a word, the beginnings of everything from which a people and a government could be formed; and meanwhile, there

was neither a people nor a government in it. During the time we are studying, there was nothing resembling a nation, a government, in the sense in which these words are now commonly understood. We encountered a multitude of private forces, individual facts, local institutions, but we saw nothing general, nothing public, we saw neither politics in the proper sense of the word, nor true nationality” (Guizot 2007: 185). Even the later absolutist monarchies, when referring to themselves a nation, limited the scope of its semantic meaning only to the aristocracy, not to be confused with the people, who represented the politically non-subjective lower classes (Malakhov 2005: 18).

Russia’s historical and institutional movement towards a centralised territorial state with a unifying Orthodox identity was catalysed at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The key contribution of Peter the Great’s reforms is associated with a new stage of the unification of Russian lands, the centralisation of mechanisms of power and taxation, and, above all, the creation of a professional army and bureaucracy. All these elements for the first time form the institutional configuration of a territorial state in the form of a class-based centralised monarchy. The most important element of the empire was the regular professional army, which replaced the outdated *streltsy* troops. The core of the army, and subsequently the political order, became a consolidated nobility headed by an absolute monarch, who distributed land with its population as a *resource for sustenance* and reward for military and state service. The army, which was designed to defend the territory of the Russian Empire, became an institutional model for organising the governance of all social spheres, including civil service, economic development, and the spiritual sphere. This initial core, which formed the service class and was regulated by the Table of Ranks, became the cornerstone of the reproduction of the Russian elite in the following centuries. This institutional model functioned until the inevitable expansion of the narrow model of aristocratic modernity to include the majority of the population. The era of total mass wars required the scaling of a professional regular army to a *nation in arms*, which simultaneously conferred mass political rights and displaced hereditary ruling dynasties along with the nobility.

Thus, Peter’s reforms established the basic identity of imperial Russia, which, despite the inevitable accumulation of internal con-

flicts and contradictions in the triad of faith, tsar, and Fatherland that emerged as a result of the expansion of the Tsardom of Muscovy into imperial Russia, existed almost unchanged for two centuries. This is a paradoxical configuration of an early modern state in its institutional basis, whose fruits could be enjoyed by the service class, while the negative costs of class society were mainly consigned to the peasantry. The undoubted merit of Peter I's reforms was the unification and concentration of power using available resources to strengthen it. This brought Russia closer to the now familiar modern state, which concept was enshrined in Europe by a set of treaties that defined the contours of the Peace of Westphalia. The key elements of the modern state include its sovereignty in foreign affairs and the autonomy of national (state) elites that control the territory and determine the political order and hierarchy of values. At the same time, the model of *internal colonisation* organically led to the loss of cultural and other intrinsic value of the overwhelming majority of Orthodox Christians, who turned into a resource for the consolidation of the absolute monarchy. This model continued to operate in the Soviet period in the form of an *anti-empire*, where modernisation became indistinguishable from the asymmetrical exploitation of the Russian centre for the sake of the accelerated development of the borderlands and peripheries in the form of the union republics (Etkind 2013). In this context, the long revolutionary turn of February-October 1917 contained, among other things, the desire to liberate the metropolis from the unbearable imperial burden; according to this logic, right-wing currents (the Cadets, the Octobrists, the All-Russian National Union, etc.) began to act in accordance with the logic of the national liberation movement to endow the Russian people with civic dignity and inalienable rights. All this prepared the historical ground for the subsequent birth of the *nation as a fellow citizenry of equals*.

Thanks to the centralisation of its army and bureaucracy, the Russian estate-based empire was able to sustain itself as a cultural collection of different ethnic groups, languages, religions, and peoples, politically united only by arrangements between the emperor and his vassals, as well as between the elites of the metropolis and those of the colonies and peripheries. Indeed, the inclusion of foreign cultural and religious entities into the empire did not imply any deliberate attempts to assimilate them. Rather the peoples that

made up the empire lived according to their own distinct traditions, customs, and culture, without forming a co-citizenship and united only by a minimal set of obligations of the peripheries in relation to the centre, but not to each other – from the promise of neutrality to the obligation to form military units of a specified size, or the payment of tribute or taxes in exchange for guarantees of security and the preservation of autonomy. Consequently, the collapse of the empire took the form of the termination of agreements between the ruling elites, when territorially distant colonies or peripheral territories easily broke away from the centre of the empire to form new states (Poland, Finland). Therefore, the political formats of the class-based pre-modern empire and modern nationalism in the political format of the nation-state belong to different historical times. Under the conditions of Modernity, empire can only function as a political metaphor to refer to large sovereign states – *great powers*.

The Russian Empire, as one of the centuries-old European leaders, played an important role in stabilising the pan-European space. At the same time, Peter I established what was in many respects a provincial (colonial) worldview, which saw Europe as an unquestionable source for imitation. It is thus even more paradoxical that the Russian Empire repeatedly had to act as the *last European* (Fyodor Dostoyevsky) in coming to Europe's rescue from various wars and collapses. However, the key element of national formation – the transformation of the hierarchical, estate-based society with its consolidating Orthodox religious identity into a project of *equal co-citizenship* based on the narrative of nationalism – still lay ahead.

**Contradictions of the Soviet people: ethnic, class and civic.**

At the heart of the USSR's political project lay the overdue problem of transforming the class system of the Russian Empire into a civic nation, which was catalysed by the First World War: "The problem that empires faced in the modern era was not the problem of 'inefficiency', but the problem of legitimacy. Since 1789, when the principle of the will of the people, or nation, has been asserted as the principle of legitimation of authority, the governments of imperial states have found themselves in a delicate position. They cannot simply adapt the institutions of representative government... The principle of 'self-determination of the people', interpreted in the spirit of nationalism (one people – one state – one culture), ticks next to them like a time bomb" (Malakhov 2010: 109). The politi-

cal genesis of nations, which became widespread in the First World War during the mutual undermining of the participating empires through the support of national movements and minorities in the enemy camp, led to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary, and the Russian Empire. In the second round, following the results of the Second World War, the metropolises of colonial empires – especially Great Britain and France – suffered a loss of legitimacy. The 20<sup>th</sup> century became a long period of disintegration of empires and pseudo-imperial loose *multinational federations* (Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, USSR, India, etc.), which was largely driven by the legitimising principle of self-determination of political ethnic nations. Since the territories of modern nation-states are spaces of mixed habitation for many ethnic groups, and moreover, any metropolis is multi-ethnic, solving the problem of political self-determination by drawing ever more fragmented territorial borders simultaneously becomes a way of creating new, divided minorities, who in turn lay claim to political self-determination. According to such a projection, the number of communities divided by new borders only increases, as does the number of minorities and their mutual claims. Thus, formally multiplying the number of states on the global political map does not solve the original problem: any modern nation contains minorities having the potential to strive for political self-determination and autonomy.

The problem of how to achieve civil consolidation instead of an endless *parade of sovereignties* was not resolved during the existence of the USSR, which was a nation only externally and rhetorically, but upon closer examination it comprised a never-resolved set of ethnic, religious, class, territorial and other contradictions that prevented the creation of a civic nation in the form of the Soviet people. This entire contradictory and complex political structure was based not even on attempts to create a political nation, but rather on the principles of specific ideological regulation and indoctrination, where, instead of the self-determining will of the people, only its palliatives and individual parts were used as a means of personifying the political body of the nation as a whole. While this could be the vanguard of revolutionary workers (the proletariat), it could just as easily be politically self-determining ethnic minorities, legitimised in their secessionist aspirations by the logic of compensation for past oppression. Or it could be the system of people's

councils at all levels, formally expressing the will of the *working people*, but lacking autonomous subjectivity, etc. Thus, the real unity and integrity of the value-institutional sphere of Soviet society was preserved only thanks to the Communist Party, which “in contrast to the decorative system of councils and Soviet republics, was the genuine system of power in the USSR”. At the same time, “the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) – Communist Party of the Soviet Union always remained a single, centralised, all-Union organisation without the slightest hint of federalism: the party committees of the “national republics” were simply its regional branches – nothing more” (Salmin 1992: 35).

Leftist thought often interprets the Bolsheviks as the saviours of the Russian Empire, who restored it in the modernised version of the USSR to ensure the *cultural flourishing* of all the nationalities and peoples that made it up. It seems that such a position is at least debatable; moreover, the national policy of the Bolsheviks in the form of the anti-empire (exploitation and weakening of the centre in favour of the peripheries) turned out to be a failure already in the very first years of Soviet power. The system-forming Russian people in many ways found themselves hostage to the tsarism (imperialism) that had already sunk into oblivion and the Great Russian chauvinism (as a radical degree of ethno-nationalism) that never existed. However, a national civic consciousness, to replace the mentality of subjects, was yet to be formed in the future amid the ruins of the estate-based empire. Indeed, despite their negative practical consequences (the widespread and imperative *indigenisation of elites and cultures*, the conflict-prone nature of internal borders, *the ascribed nature* of nationality, etc.), the systemic ideological priorities of the Bolsheviks in the area of national policy were never corrected during the entire subsequent Soviet period. This confirms that for the Soviet nomenklatura, with a weakening and never truly established centre/majority (the state-forming people in the socialist state – purportedly expressing “the will and interests of the workers, peasants, intelligentsia, and working people of all nations and nationalities of the country”<sup>1</sup> – was absent) and a periphery gradu-

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<sup>1</sup> *Constitution (Basic Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (as amended on October 7, 1977)*, available at: [https://constitution.garant.ru/history/ussr-rsfsr/1977/red\\_1977/5478732/](https://constitution.garant.ru/history/ussr-rsfsr/1977/red_1977/5478732/) (accessed August 1, 2025). (in Russ.).

ally dispersing into ethno-national compartments, such a national policy, which ultimately led to the greatest geopolitical upset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was entirely deliberate.

The thoughtless and endless carving up of dozens of ethno-national entities within the formerly unitary Russian Empire, which legally transformed it into a formal union of 15 autonomous states plus the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) into an internal federal union within the USSR, from the very beginning cemented the worst-case scenario of subsequent disintegration. The decades-long legitimisation and strengthening of political and legal boundaries formed an axis around which, with historical inevitability, the phantom Soviet people disintegrated. When the USSR was formed in December 1922, the territory of the RSFSR was incomparably larger than what it would become by the end of the USSR's existence, since it included "all the current republics of Central Asia (except for the relatively small territories of Khorezm and Bukhara) and a number of regions and districts of Ukraine and Belarus. The territories and population of the then Ukraine (excluding the western regions annexed in 1939, without Crimea, without some other areas) and Belarus (excluding the western and eastern regions) ... *In fact, the "Union" was a formal union of the direct heir and successor of the empire (the RSFSR) with two small peripheral Slavic republics (Ukraine and Belarus) ... with a bizarre state formation (the Transcaucasian Federation), created through the very artificial unification of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan and calling into question the idea of the national-state nature of the subjects of the Union, which supposedly formed its basis*" (Salmin 1992: 35).

The Soviet Union was born as a model for a new society, an analogue of a future earthly paradise, which was initially planned to be upscaled to include all of humanity. The USSR was ideologically centred around the secular religion of socialism and addressed to the new progressive majority, i.e., the working people. Since the utopian project was addressed to all of humanity, its initial territory and existing political borders seemed to be of no great significance in the context of the future movement towards a world Soviet socialist republic without borders. However, quite quickly, claims to global revolutionary expansion dried up in favour of building socialism in a single country. The scale of the communist utopia was thus reduced to a concrete historical leftist variation of the liberal

utopia. Along with it, the system of people's councils at all levels quickly gave way to the political dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party.

The key problem here was that the rejection of world revolution required corresponding changes in the internal structure of the USSR, which had previously been viewed only as a temporary springboard, whose political and administrative structure was not of fundamental importance. However, the temporary and palliative, the opportunistic and situational, had by then become the only political reality. Since the original Bolshevik utopias and fantasies were not adjusted in the context of subsequent negative experiences, they became increasingly disconnected both from the unattainable ideocratic ideals and from the technologies of civic nations. Instead of a global eraser of political boundaries of bourgeois nations, the USSR turned into a self-destructive conveyor belt for the production of ethnic nations. The Soviet Union, according to Alexei Salmin's metaphor, became a *colossus with feet of clay*, lacking a state-forming people capable of acting as a majority to stabilise this structure. Vladimir Putin expressed extreme criticism regarding the original legal principles of the formation and administrative division of the USSR: "Why was it necessary, with lordly generosity, to satisfy any and all boundlessly growing nationalist ambitions on the peripheries of the former empire? To transfer huge, often unrelated territories to newly, and arbitrarily, formed union republics. I repeat, to be passed on together with the population of historical Russia. Moreover, in fact, these administrative units were given the status and form of national state entities. I ask myself again: why was it necessary to make such generous gifts, which the most ardent nationalists had never even dreamed of before, and also to grant the republics the right to secede from the unitary state without any preconditions?"<sup>2</sup>.

The cultures of all the republics – except the RSFSR – legitimised by Stalin's contradictory formulation "national in form and socialist in content" (although socialism is international and was supposed to put an end to national political forms as a means of hegemony of the bourgeoisie), inevitably began to turn into *simply*

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<sup>2</sup> Putin V.V. *Address of the President of the Russian Federation, 21.02.2022*, available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/67828> (accessed August 1, 2025). (in Russ.).

*national*, despite up to a certain point only using the deadened and performative socialist rhetoric. Stalin's confusing explanation was that "National cultures (and languages, therefore) must first flourish to the fullest in order to, having exhausted themselves, merge later, in the future, during the period of the complete victory of socialism, into one common socialist culture. The flourishing of national cultures in form and socialist cultures in content during the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat for their future merging into one common culture, socialist in both form and content, – that is the situation"<sup>3</sup>. The only thing that is unclear in this passage is: for what reasons would the *flourishing* ethno-national cultures of the sovereign union republics suddenly acquire the desire to part with their national forms? Which, as time has shown, were their true cultural content; after all, it was the *socialist content* of culture that turned out to be an empty shell.

Thus, the Soviet Union as a political construct in the second half of its existence began to transform into an ideological phantom, within which the particular interests of the union and republican ethnic nomenklaturas, which ran counter to the interests of the Soviet people as a whole to catalyse centrifugal processes, increasingly prevailed. The discrepancy between the highest values of the Soviet project and the real, society-differentiating political practices of the CPSU committees and people's councils at all levels, which created double moral standards for describing Soviet society in terms of what should be and what was observed in reality, became increasingly obvious (Martyanov, Fishman 2020).

Perhaps the late USSR could still have been saved by the idea of a nation-state, where the Russian people could have acted as an integrator and centre of attraction. But the autonomous national development of the latter was initially prohibited, and its historical subjectivity was undermined by the absence of national attributes that were present in all other republics: the right to political self-determination, its own Communist Party, and a *titular territory*. The same political logic was expressed in the historical evolution of the administrative structure of the USSR and the RSFSR:

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<sup>3</sup> Stalin I.V. Reply letter to V.Y. Kasatkin, an employee of the Institute of the Red Professorship, *Rossiyskiy gosudarstvennyy arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoy istorii*, fund 558, reg. 11, file 132, sh. 36–42. (in Russ.).

“The Bolsheviks treated the Russian people as inexhaustible material for social experiments. They dreamed of a world revolution that, in their opinion, would abolish nation states altogether. Therefore, they arbitrarily cut up borders and distributed generous territorial ‘gifts’. Ultimately, what exactly the Bolshevik leaders were guided by when they tore the country apart no longer matters. One can argue about the details, the background and logic of certain decisions. One thing is clear: Russia was actually robbed”<sup>4</sup>.

If in 1922, when the USSR was formed, the RSFSR accounted for 94.7 % of the area and 67.5 % of the population of the USSR, then in 1989 it accounted for only 76.3 % of the area and 52.3 % of the citizens. At the same time, the area of ethnic autonomous republics on the territory of the RSFSR during the Soviet period (within the 1989 borders) increased from 27.7 % to 53.3 % (Salmin 1992: 39). The arbitrary cutting of borders within the USSR was never the subject of popular democratic decisions and referendums, but was carried out according to voluntaristic approaches. Despite the declarations of independence and autonomy on the part of the union republics, the borders between them in the USSR were de facto perceived as administrative, and their changes as consequently not requiring the expression of the will of the people. However, once what had been merely administrative borders became political ones (and historically Russian territories and populations found themselves, not by their own choice, in other states), the consequences of the division of the Russian nation manifested in the most negative way, producing millions of refugees and migrants from the new post-Soviet states to their historic homeland. In this context, a convincing legal argument is related to the fact that the decision to create the USSR was enshrined in the Declaration and Treaty on the Creation of the USSR of 30 December 1922. The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 could only have implied a consistent return to the original borders of the four republics that founded the USSR (the RSFSR, the Byelorussian and Ukrainian SSRs, and the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR – Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia), since all subsequent internal territorial changes appear

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<sup>4</sup> Putin V.V. *On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, 12.07.2021, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/articles/66181> (accessed August 1, 2025). (in Russ.).

questionable from the standpoint of their legal legitimacy, requiring, at a minimum, popular referendums in the vast Russian lands which, like parcels of land with serfs, were cut off from the original territory of the RSFSR and, with the stroke of a bureaucratic pen, were transferred at various times to other republics that later became independent states.

Moreover, as a result of the entire administrative-ideological evolution of the USSR, it was precisely Russian identity that dissolved into Soviet identity to the point of indistinguishability. Accordingly, the collapse of the USSR was most painful for the RSFSR, which, unlike all the other republics, did not simultaneously develop its own autonomous national identity based on the cultural identity of the majority. And while a sociologically recorded shift was already occurring during the late Soviet period in favour of the priority of identifying the titular majority as citizens of national republics in the overwhelming majority of national republics, in the RSFSR and Belarus the all-Union Soviet identity still prevailed (Gudkov 2004: 142). Moreover, in many ways, even in modern Russia, Russians remain the equivalent of the *amorphous Soviet man* in the USSR.

**The Russian nation in the context of Great Russia-RSFSR-Russian Federation: the problem of conceptualisation.** Due to the suppressed political identity of the RSFSR during the Soviet period, the Russian state that emerged following the collapse of the USSR was confronted with a whole complex of nation-building problems, many of which have yet to find a satisfactory solution: “The problem of ‘compatriots’ and ex-compatriots from across the USSR; to put it mildly, an uncertainty regarding the legitimacy of the current borders and of the very composition of the Russian political body; the dubious nature of state symbolism, including collective rituals and holidays; the vagueness of assessments of both the Soviet and pre-Soviet past; an extreme ambiguity concerning the desired future, both in terms of the internal way of life and its place in the world; even the absence of a self-designation accepted by all citizens (‘russkiye’ [ethnic Russians] or ‘rossiyane’ [citizens of Russia]?) – all these are obvious symptoms of the essential defectiveness of contemporary Russian statehood” (Kaspe 2004: 73).

These problems are most clearly expressed in the repertoire of self-descriptions of the current Russian nation, which consists of a constant selection of metaphors from a raw materials empire to

sovereign democracy (Vladislav Surkov), as well as the formulation of conceptual constructs in the form of a *multinational people* (Constitution of Russia), a Eurasian *civilisation state* and even a spherical *civilisation of civilisations* (Sergey Karaganov). The development of these metaphors is typically accompanied by attempts to justify that Russians find themselves in a modified USSR during the period of its greatest magnificence and global influence. Other discussions were developed along the lines of the Russian world (*russskiy mir*), representing a continuation of the long-lost ideas of Pan-Slavism. Such discourses may also be peppered with endless and meaningless mantras about friendship among people (all modern nations are multi-ethnic, the thesis of the desirability of peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups within the same political territory is axiomatic), multi-confessionalism (implicitly presupposing a rejection of the leading role of Orthodoxy), and the multi-nationality of Russian society (which in terms of ethnic diversity not only does not differ significantly, but is even less ethnically diverse than many large nations, including unitary ones (Martyanov 2025: 84-86)). All of the aforementioned methods of collective self-description are united in their rejection of the normative narrative of nationalism, which relies on the culture of the majority (the state-forming people) to consolidate the civic cultural-historical unity of all citizens, as cemented by common feats, sacrifices, and sacred symbols. Moreover, the concept of nationalism per se has acquired an increasingly negative connotation since 2014, having been increasingly lumped together and/or actually used as a synonym for extremism, terrorism, and Nazism, as observed during the latest coup d'état in Ukraine. Another compelling reason for the rejection of civic nationalism by the political nomenclature of post-Soviet Russia is, paradoxically, its strong connection with democracy. For all its formally democratic trappings, the traditions of legitimising Russian power throughout its history are connected to the fact that it views its own foundations as being broader than mere popular representation. *In Russian political thought, the idea of representation as an obligation with assumed responsibility to those represented has almost invariably been considered insufficient and limited.* In this sense, the current political elite is a simultaneously a successor to the pre-revolutionary monarchy, the Bolsheviks, and the Soviet nomenclature, who also did not position themselves as merely representing the people

(nation), but spoke in the name of God, communism, class, history, tradition, civilisation, a great power, etc. Such sacred, transcendental, ideocratic foundations of the socio-political order have always been presented as complementing – and often in the history of the Russian state, surpassing – its responsibility to the people. Hence the natural apprehension about engaging with large national identities, on which the legitimacy of power depends, whereas minorities, when appearing in the role of privileged clients, are a more convenient means for representing a multinational people.

Under the present circumstances, the unconvincing nature of imperial rhetoric is readily apparent. A real empire could only be built in the form of a military-political and cultural structure that extended far beyond the current territory of Russia and possessed obvious cultural, military, economic, demographic and other types of superiority over surrounding territories. Attempts to characterise the Russian Federation – a present-day culturally and historically homogeneous entity with an overwhelming numerical predominance of Russians in the territory of Great Russia, formerly the centre of the Russian Empire and the USSR – as a new empire would be akin to trying to label as empires the metropolitan cores of all former empires: the island of Great Britain, the present European territories of France, Spain, Portugal, or Turkey as the core of the historical Ottoman Empire.

Thus, the development of Russian civic national self-awareness in modern Russia has not yet been completely divorced from attempts at symbolic appropriation of the historical phantoms of imperialism and Sovietness. Russia still claims to be an expression of the *Soviet legacy*, which is somehow connected with the attempt to solve the problems of developing a national identity in the present. The attractiveness of the Soviet past is partly understandable; it is due to the fact that “*Soviet patriotism* was largely constructed as an improved version or at least as a functional analogue of Western nationalisms: it solved similar problems and appealed to similar feelings” (Martyanov, Fishman 2016: 313). The problem that arises here, however, is that Soviet patriotism as a way of forming a universal political identity continues to dominate the minds of some Russian elites even after the collapse of the USSR, having degraded in the new political context to a broadly imperial rhetoric. Such dreams may involve resurrecting the Russian Empire, attributing an

imperial character to Soviet society, or building a Eurasian/liberal/raw materials-based empire. And almost always the sought-after empire is described through something ephemeral like the Soviet *friendship of peoples* or the *current multinationality*, which for some reason is assumed to be organic and natural, despite the bloody Soviet history lessons, the divorce of the republics, as well as any mutual claims and cultural differences within Russian society itself. Indeed, such a federal conglomerate of autonomous and territorially grounded ethnic groups-nationalities-peoples on *indigenous territories*, which formally follows the principles of political-administrative governance in the USSR, contradicts the idea of a consolidated modern nation in terms of equal co-citizenship, which is indifferent to class, ethnicity and faith. Thus, to the extent that it is constructed according to similar ideological and territorial principles, the historical fate of the *multinational Russian people* may follow the path of the Soviet federative people.

The nation-state as a product of egalitarian co-citizenship presupposes the weakening of previous cultural differences, and indeed their maximum possible removal to beyond the public space, which is oriented toward the consolidation and unification of citizens into a political community having a single identity, regardless of their cultural differences. Clearly the politicisation of these differences and creation of collective entities within the nation on their basis will tend to destroy the civil unity of the nation – at least, to the extent that their particular interests are opposed to those of the nation as a whole. Therefore, the Russian nation can be *multinational* only if the ethnic groups that comprise it have not created a civil nation, remaining a disunited set of ethno-confessional and linguistic groups. Nevertheless, any nation is always culturally differentiated, since invariably including various ethnic, religious, linguistic, class and other communities. However, a stable national culture and/or identity, as well as the social order and cultural hierarchy that embodies it, can only rely on a cultural-historical majority (linguistic, ethnic, religious) that embodies the will of the people: “without Russians as an ethnic group, without the Russian people, there is not and cannot be a Russian world or Russia herself. This statement does not contain any claim to superiority, exclusivity, or chosenness. This is simply a fact, as is the fact that our Constitution clearly enshrines the status of the Russian language as the language of the

state-forming people”<sup>5</sup>. Of course cultural minorities can preserve and even develop their particular identity, but the particular should not and cannot be on a par with the whole, much less replace it. Any recognition of the political equality of the majority and the minority, of the norm and its exceptions, acts to destroy any cultural, political, or ideological unity that might arise from this norm.

In this context, rather than being posited upon their asserted *natural pluralism*, the formation of a Russian civic identity will require more universal cultural and ideological foundations. Today, agents of civil identity construction at the level of normative and ideological documents are attempting to reproduce the negative historical experience of nation-building in the USSR. However, according to the provided ideological retrospective, such a task is obviously unrealistic at present, since from the late USSR and the early post-Soviet period, modern Russia inherited two *unfinished constructions*: (1) *an under-imagined community* as an unfinished process of constructing a national identity (Fishman 2018); (2) the existence of only the *lower floor* of public morality in the form of the morality of local groups defending particular interests in the absence of general civic values specific to contemporary Russia that are capable of binding individual citizens together in a *large* modern society (Martyanov, Fishman 2020).

However, the construction of a nation in terms of its highest values presupposes reaching the sacred level of developing the foundations of social consolidation. Since a new value-creating centre has yet to be developed following the decline of Soviet ideology and morality, post-Soviet elites remain more like technical locum tenens (nomenklatura) substituting for a *chief ideologist* than autonomous political subjects/ideologists on the political map of the world (Fishman 2023). In the USSR, the highest values were determined by the context of the construction of communism, the description of the Soviet people as a classless society and the vanguard of humanity, personifying a progressive social formation. In contem-

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<sup>5</sup> Putin V.V. *Speech by Russian President V.V. Putin at the plenary session of the XXV World Russian People’s Council*, [27.11.2023], available at: <https://vrns.ru/documents/vystuplenie-prezidenta-rossii-vv-putina-na-plenarnom-zasedanii-xxv-vsemirnogo-russkogo-narodnogo-so/> (accessed August 1, 2025). (in Russ.).

porary Russia, traditional values currently function as a palliative stand in for the nation's higher values; however, on closer inspection, these values reveal themselves to be universal, applicable not only to Russian society but to the world as a whole. Therefore, to describe the specific historical Russian society, an original ideological interpretation and hierarchisation of traditional values is required. Without constructing a national narrative that answers the questions: who we are, *where we come from and where we are going*, such values will exist in parallel with the applied tasks of justifying Russia's consolidating identity.

The acquisition of cultural and military-political subjectivity, on which economic success largely depends, is associated with the difficult path of acquiring sovereignty and one's own language of self-description: "Russia was not created by international treaties, it was not created by other states and not under the protection of other states: it grew, so to speak, from within itself, it was created and expanded by the Russian people" (Sidorov 1912: 62). This path potentially strengthens Russia's opportunities to rely on its own interpretation of European and Western historical narratives in a situation of global turbulence. The current weakening of Western hegemony naturally leads to the final decolonisation of the non-Western world, to the return to international relations based on the criterion of national interest and the nation-states that express it.

Currently, Russian society finds itself in a situation in which it must undergo a third historical attempt to create a civic nation. The first, following the 1905 revolution, led to the limitation of autocracy and the expansion of popular participation in political decision-making, albeit with the observance of many restrictive qualifications and according to class principles. The second attempt in 1917 began with the February coup and ended with the October coup, which resulted in the formation of a specific model of the nation as the Soviet people, which was however permeated with a multitude of cultural, ideological, ethno-national, class and other contradictions, due to which it ultimately failed. Currently, the attempt to create a modern nation also faces systemic difficulties associated with the strengthening of the rentier-based and class-based nature of Russian society and attempts to immediately jump into an imperial – or even civilisational – self-description without first creating a consolidated political nation (Fishman et al. 2019).

In this case, imperial-civilisational ideologists, suffering from the syndrome of the loss of former greatness, forget that on the modern political map of the world there are only territorial nation-states, to which the application of such epithets is possible only metaphorically. A nation may be or eventually become a great sovereign power whose sovereignty extends far beyond its borders, and a potential centre of attraction for its allies, dependent satellites, and limitrophes. However, the logic of the *empire (civilisation) within the Russian Federation* works in a diametrically opposite way, reinforcing double standards, destroying cultural hierarchies and unifying historical narratives, giving rise to titular peoples and the claims of ethno-elites. It is obvious that the idea of *empire within modern Russia* politically legitimises these parodies of imperial outliers, colonies and peripheries, which have been invented for some reason within the metropolis, but do not exist outside of it. Accordingly, if not in the form of a continuation and expansion of the nation, but in its place amorphous ideological constructions based on *ahistorical* and *timeless traditional values*, then this only means that we continue to be ignorant of the society in which we live, and make decisions that are not based on real possibilities and pragmatic considerations, but dictated by dubious historical patterns. The controversial nature of these models is further enhanced in the context of contemporary Russia finding itself as part of Modernity, under which conditions Russian citizens of any ethnicity need a nation in order to preserve themselves, whose implicit values are human rights and freedoms, a social state, civil equality, democracy, progress, etc. And if we are talking about its Russian cultural basis, then it is only because in this space there is no other *consolidating bearer of the culture of Modernity*.

**Conclusion.** It is futile to characterise the formation of the Russian nation in terms of an ongoing decline of former imperial grandeur and a narrative of geopolitical defeat, both of which characterisations are objectively permeated by resentful moods. On the contrary, the basis for the self-description of the Russian nation that exists here and now can be liberation from the oppression of over-extended imperialism, including in the Soviet anti-imperial version, in which Russians were exploited more intensively than other constituent peoples. Having become for the first time the overwhelming majority within the current borders, it can finally recognise its

true collective interests, which cannot be replaced by any imaginary Slavic unity, nor by the struggle for the rights of workers throughout the world, nor by the accelerated development of the peripheries, outlying regions and backward tribes that is contrary to its own interests. The biography of a people (nation) is organically described by the modern language of civic nationalism, which is oriented toward strategic expression and adherence to the vital interests of the majority. In this context, rhetoric aimed at marginalising both the concept and narrative of nationalism seems reckless. Even more devoid of integrity are attempts to separate – and even more so to oppose – nationalism and democracy. Both concepts, nation and demos, have the same root, which refers to *people*. Therefore, nationalism is the most consistent political self-description of a people, which prevents it from dissolving into the totality of constituent classes, groups and minorities, and from the desire to make the people merely an instrument for the realisation of some great religious and class mission addressed to abstract humanity. In this context, the Russian establishment's self-imposed prohibition on nationalism – including even its civic version rather than ethnonational variants (which remain freely practiced in Russia's ethnically designated regions with titular minorities) – appears perplexing given its effective deployment across all post-Soviet states and the wider world.

Russia, like the other Soviet republics, can effectively rely on the narrative of decolonisation of its past, on the liberation of the Russian people, their history and heritage, which were suppressed in the name of alien goals and objectives. This means that outside of Russia there are no fraternal peoples to whom it is obligated, but there is a potential nation, albeit currently divided within itself and externally, which can be effectively consolidated in the political format of Modernity as a nation-state. What remained of the Russian Empire after the USSR was its core – Great Russia, also known as the RSFSR and now as the Russian Federation. It is a community of citizens who share a common history, language, culture, values, equal rights and living space. Thus, it would be a strategic mistake to attempt to transform the last bastion of the Russian people – who have never achieved their own nation-state – into a new empire. Historical empires have always been built on a centre-periphery model, in which the centres and cores dominated the outskirts and

peripheries, which were foreign and alien in historical, cultural, religious, linguistic, and other respects. Such structures have always been loose and fragile: the differences in the initial social foundations inevitably led to the disintegration of heterogeneous formations, where centres only temporarily exploited the peripheries until they had squandered their demographic, technological and cultural advantages, as can be observed in the history of the collective rise and fall of European empires. A less common variant involves the ability of the centre to assimilate heterogeneous outskirts, which is typical, for example, of China. This is the version of the *long-term Sinicisation* of everything into which China comes into spatial contact, whose diasporas never dissolve into the outside world, and into which its occasional conquerors (Mongols, Manchus) assimilate without a trace over the period of several generations to become themselves Chinese.

Today's Russia has what might be its last chance to become a united nation on the terms of *equal citizenship* and consolidation on the foundation of Russian history, language and culture of the nation, which are the only possible basis for its sacred *enchantment*, the justification of the highest values and self-description. Other options for cultural and other kinds of consolidation seem to present dead ends. Empire and civilisation as allegorical concepts for a *great nation* create only the logic of the myth of a lost, but *someday* to be regained greatness, in the name of which any current manifestations of separatism and internal conflict are ignored. This is a false path, replacing the project of Russia as a great nation and sovereign power with a loosely defined and consequently phantom empire-civilisation. The slogan of a *multinational* empire or civilisation justifies many harmful practices of minorities, foreigners, and diasporas. The politicisation of ethnicity, legitimisation of cultural differences and granting of privileges only increase the appetites of minorities and fertilise the ground for conflict, threatening a repeat of the catastrophic path of the USSR. In this context national identity as a consolidating goal is palliatively replaced by resentment towards external enemies, the formation of an empire/civilisation, criticism of abstract liberals, and the rhetoric of returning to traditional values in isolation from the ontology of an authentic traditional society. Conversely, national policy within the conditions of a nation can

have only one goal – the internal consolidation of the nation in terms of the development of its cultural and historical unity, while conflicts, differences, interpretations and claims of various minorities that provoke centrifugal tendencies will emerge along this path by themselves.

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