Veera Laine

NATIONALISM AS AN ARGUMENT IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

Four perspectives on language in action

COMMENTATIONES SCIENTIARUM SOCIALIUM

80

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Four perspectives on language in action

Academic dissertation

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyses the uses of the concept of nationalism in Russia from a historical perspective. It is based on four empirical studies examining textual material produced between the years 2000 and 2020. During this time, and after the so-called “conservative turn” in particular, the state leadership in Russia adopted increasingly authoritarian policies vis-à-vis society, and started to portray Russia as being under an external threat. The annexation of Crimea and the onset of the war in Ukraine in 2014 solidified the way in which recent political changes in Russia were characterised as “growing nationalism”.

In this temporal context, the study suggests that nationalist discourses are currently shifting, and traces these shifts in scholarly and everyday language. The negative connotations of nationalism in everyday language affect its scholarly use, which is why the aspects of nationalism as an analytical concept, as well as the complex relationship between the concept and the term itself, are expounded in the study. Following the tradition of critical nationalism studies, the dissertation approaches the ‘nation’ as a political claim that results from a constructive process in language. The dissertation draws on the rhetorical tradition of conceptual history in analysing specific concepts, metaphors and narratives within nationalist discourses as a means of framing politics. The way language is used simultaneously defines the boundaries of actual policies. More specifically, the rhetorical choices of politicians map the conditions of belonging to a nation, duly having real implications for people’s lives.

The study contributes to the literature that challenges the view of nationalism as an instrument at the disposal of state leaders for the purpose of enhancing their legitimacy. To this end, the dissertation treats nationalism as a contested and continuously changing argument in the sphere of politics, showing that the state interpretation of the nationalist argument is not necessarily shared among the wider public. The publications that make up the dissertation contend that the state leadership produces a narrative of a holistic and homogeneous nation, unified by a shared victorious past, distinctive moral-traditional values, and historical multinationality, reinforced with a specific role for ethnic Russians. In this sense, the state authorities maintain a nationalist argument that depicts the “proper” borders of the nation as being simultaneously wider and more restricted than the state borders, based on the acceptance of traditional Russian values. The state leadership’s aim to dominate the social process of constructing a nation cannot be interpreted as having become “common sense”, and thus the nationalist contestation prevails.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Väitöstutkimus tarkastelee nationalismin käsitettä nyky-Venäjällä historiallisena ilmiönä. Työ perustuu neljään tutkimusartikkeliin, joissa analysoidaan vuosien 2000–2020 välillä tuotettua tekstiaineistoa. Tämän ajanjakson aikana Venäjän politiikassa on tapahtunut niin kutsuttu konservatiivinen käänne, kun hallinto on muuttunut entistä itsevaltaisemmaksi sekä korostanut ulkoisia uhkakuvia. ”Nationalismin nousulla” on selitetty monia muutoksia Venäjän politiikassa erityisesti kevään 2014 jälkeen, kun Venäjä valtasi Krimin niemimaan ja Ukrainan sota alkoi.

Väitöstutkimusta perustele havainto siitä, että nationalismin kieli on Venäjällä muutoksessa: Venäjän hallinto pyrkii yhdenmukaistamaan tulkintoja kansasta ja sen erityispiirteistä samalla kun käsitettä käytetään selittämään Venäjän viimeaikaista politiikkaa. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on analysoida näitä muutoksia nationalismin käsitteen käytössä ja asettaa ne laajemmin ajan ja paikan kontekstiin. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa halutaan huomioida nationalismin sanan ja käsitteen moniulotteinen suhde, sillä nationalismia ylläpitävässä puheessa ei välttämättä käytetä itse sanaa. Nationalismi-sanan kielteinen kaiku arkikielessä vaikuttaa sen käyttöön tutkimusaihetta rajaavana analyttisenä käsitteenä sekä sen soveltamiseen politiikassa, ja nämä kielenkäytön tavat limittyvät.

Väitöskirja asettuu osaksi kriittisen nationalismin tutkimuksen perinnettä, jossa kansa(kunta) nähdään sosiaalisen luomisprosessin tuloksena. Koska tämä prosessi tapahtuu ensisijaisesti kielessä, tutkimuksessa hyödynnetään käsitehistoriallista lähestymistapaa. Sen avulla käsitteiden, metaforien ja narratiivien käyttöä analysoidaan kansakuntaa tuottavassa politiikan kielessä. Kieli rajaa myös käytännön politiikan mahdollisuuksia, sillä retoriset valinnat osoittavat kansaan kuulumisen ehtoja, jotka vaikuttavat konkreettisesti ihmisten elämään.

Tutkimus osoittaa, ettei nationalismin tulkitseminen politiikan välineenä täysin tavoita ilmiön luonnetta. Väitöstutkimuksen julkaisuista välittyy nykyhallinnon tulkinta yhtenäisestä Venäjän kansasta. Sitä perustellaan painottamalla voitokasta menneisyyttä, perinteistä henkis-eettistä arvopohjaa ja historiallista monikansallisuutta, jossa etnisillä venäläisillä on erityinen, kansaa kokoava rooli. Hallinnon nationalistinen argumentti piirtää kansakunnan rajat sekä nykyisen valtion rajoja laveammiksi että suppeammiksi sen mukaan, ketkä hyväksyvät hallinnon määrittelemät Venäjän perinteiset arvot. Tämän tulkinnan ei voi kuitenkaan sanoa päättäneen käsitteellistä kamppailua, sillä politiikan ylätasolla nationalismiin liitetyt merkityssisällöt ovat erilaisia kuin arkikielessä. Nationalismi pitäisi siksi ymmärtää enemmän poliittisena argumenttina, joka on luonteeltaan muuttuva ja vaatii jatkuvaa huomiota.

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A research study may appear as if it were written by an individual, but it always stems from the work of a community. This community is at the same time “imagined” and very real: we do not always encounter each other in person, but we build on each other’s thoughts. Personally, the most valuable result of this research has been the people I have engaged with during the process that started in 2016, and I would like to express my gratitude to the scholars whose work has educated me, and to everyone who has offered their insights, feedback, and support.

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Veera Laine, Helsinki, August 2021

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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

The dissertation is based on the following publications:

- I Contemporary Russian nationalisms: the state, nationalist movements, and the shared space in between. *Nationalities Papers* 2017, 45: 2, 222–37.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2016.1272562>.
- II “Biggest nationalist in the country”: self-descriptive uses of “nationalist” in contemporary Russia. *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, forthcoming (accepted for publication on 30 May, 2020).
- III “Evolution of Russia’s ‘Others’ in Presidential Discourse in 2000–2020.” In Pynnöniemi, Katri (ed.): *Nexus of Patriotism and Militarism in Russia: A Quest for Internal Cohesion*. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 2021, 49–79.
<https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-9-3>.
- IV New Generation of Victors. Narrating the Nation in the Russian Presidential Discourse, 2012–2019. *Demokratizatsiya* 2020, 28: 4, 517–40.
<https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/771532>.

The publications are referred to in the dissertation by their Roman numerals.

1 INTRODUCTION

In February 2014, Russian soldiers without any identifying insignia arrived in Crimea, soon after which Russia conducted a “referendum” to justify the annexation of the peninsula from Ukraine. The tensions in Eastern Ukraine escalated into a war that continues to this day. These events marked a watershed in European politics and in the relations between Russia and the West. As a foreign policy manoeuvre, Russia’s actions in Ukraine demonstrated its willingness to discredit the Western-dominated liberal world order, but also its tendency to undermine the national sovereignty of the “near abroad” countries. From the Russian perspective, they also drew the boundaries of the nation anew. President Vladimir Putin had hailed the annexation of Crimea as rectifying the mistake of the past, welcoming the people living in the area to “return home”.

The annexation increased scholarly and media attention towards Russian politics and boosted interpretations of nationalism as a tool that political leaders had now decided to use. According to the instrumental perception of nationalism, in its simplified reading, the political leadership of the country persuaded the people to rally around the flag, hoping that national pride in Russia’s show of force would counteract the socio-economic grievances, and in this way secure the regime’s domestic legitimacy. In this dissertation, nationalism as a grand explanation for the change in Russia’s politics is critically re-evaluated. Instead of treating nationalism as an instrument, the dissertation contributes to the literature that studies nationalism as language that shapes political practices. The original contribution of this study lies in its approach to nationalism as a contested argument in political and in analytical terms. The study considers concepts to be a fundamental way of structuring the world, which means that the everyday connotations and uses of nationalism, for example, have an effect on scholarly uses as well. Through expounding nationalism as an analytical concept, certain gaps between various understandings of the concept can be detected, which helps to contextualise the uses of nationalism as a political practice in contemporary Russia. In this way, the dissertation combines rhetorical conceptual history with the study of nationalisms in contemporary Russia, which has thus far rarely been considered in this vast field of research.

The study argues that the state authorities’ nationalist argument is based on interlinked narratives about the nation that stress multinationality, ethnic hierarchy, a shared past and conservative values as key characteristics of “Russianness”, but also shows that the key concepts of the nationalist argument are not necessarily perceived similarly by the wider public. In this sense, the dissertation finds that making the assumption that either the state or societal attitudes are monolithic presents too narrow a view of the matter. Understanding nationalism as an argument acknowledges the diversity both

between and within actors and the constantly prevailing struggle for power over the “correct” uses of nationalism.

Given that nationalism is contested as an analytical concept, and avoided and rejected as an empirical one, the various disagreements over the meanings of the word are crucial elements of study. Thus, the key issue in this dissertation is not to find the most comprehensive or the most precise definition of nationalism in Russia. Nor does the study set out to ask whether nationalism has increased, or whether Putin is a nationalist. Instead, the publications in this dissertation analyse the changing content of the nationalist language produced both by the Russian state and the actors opposing it, and show how these have become pronounced in the field of Russian politics. In order to analyse the current “fermentation” of nationalist language, the four sub-studies, each based on their own empirical collection of texts, set out to map the shifts in understanding and in using the nationalist argument in Russian politics within the past decade. In particular, the dissertation analyses how the Russian state leadership have portrayed Russianness in the 2000s, and how their nationalist argumentation changed during and after the so-called conservative turn that preceded the annexation of Crimea.

Moreover, the study contributes to the wider debate on nationalism as an analytical concept, aiming to unpack some of the generalisations in that discussion. Nationalism is treated in different ways in different disciplines, and scholars do not always recognise the gaps between divergent analytical uses on the one hand, and between academic writing and everyday language, on the other. In the public discourse, nationalism is often seen in a negative light and as a feature of cultures other than one’s own. And yet researchers cannot separate themselves from society, which is why elaboration on the various qualitative gaps between the uses of nationalism may prove both appropriate and fruitful.

Among scholars of nations and nationalism, the broad view of nationalism as a general and taken-for-granted mindset of a world consisting of nation-states has become rather mainstream. This view differs from the narrow instrumental theorisations of nationalism that treat it as a means of fulfilling certain political aims, often connecting the phenomenon to national sovereignty or state legitimacy (Feldmann & Mazepus 2018; Özkırmılı 2010, 3). This understanding could be discerned, at least implicitly, in many of the accounts that described Russian nationalism as “rising” after 2014 (Ponarin & Komin 2018b; Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2018, 2–3). However, portraying nationalism as something that can simply be “used” undermines the political risks embedded in the strategy of “increasing nationalism” in order to enhance political legitimacy. The attempts to invoke national solidarity or pride from above are not always successful, and nor can they be carried out in a fully controlled manner. One can also detect a tendency towards a normative reading of nationalism in the literature, according to which authoritarian leaders “use” nationalism, whereas democratic leaders do not act that way,

although hardly any political leader worldwide avoids nationalist argumentation.

Finally, the instrumentalist view of nationalism does not necessarily acknowledge the complexity of politics as a social process. Political argumentation not only takes place in a specific cultural context but is shaped, informed and conditioned by it (Urban 2010, 5–6). The direction of “influence” in politics is, therefore, a much more nuanced phenomenon than individual actors merely trying and succeeding or failing to influence others. This is also the case at a more practical level: a certain vision of the nation can indeed be applied for lobbying one’s interests in politics, but the chosen interpretation of the nation may also influence the political agenda of those using it (Tolz 1998, 1017). Thus, I believe the approaches that focus on nationalism as a particular language are better equipped to grasp the complexities of and around the concept than those perceiving nationalism as a political instrument.¹ Yet despite these reservations, I would argue that most of the analytical uses of the concept of nationalism today share the same core idea: nationalism is a powerful “ism” in politics precisely because it is based on a naturalised, taken-for-granted but fundamental worldview, and because it evokes strong emotions, as described by nationalism scholars.

In this dissertation, nationalism theory is combined with intellectual and conceptual history traditions, as they help to connect the recent changes in Russian politics to a wider temporal and spatial context, and point to the inherent diversity in understanding key concepts. Kari Palonen, following Quentin Skinner’s rhetorical perspective on conceptual change, describes concepts as “strategic instruments for political action”. In this way, the political significance of concepts is seen in their ability to “shape the horizon of political possibilities” when a policy has to be formed, but they can also be used for revising the horizon of the possible itself, and altering the range of policy choices altogether (Palonen 1999, 47). Studying conceptual change duly entails studying the preconditions and frames of the “actual” politics, intrinsically connected to the social reality.

In the scope of this dissertation, the way in which language is used defines politics in at least two ways. The rhetorical choices of politicians or influential individuals map the conditions for belonging to a nation, which are then reflected in the rules for institutional membership of the nation which, for example, define certain benefits, responsibilities and rights that a citizen has or is entitled to (Knott 2017). In this way, belonging to a nation becomes justified in language but has real consequences in people’s lives. Moreover, studying the content, claims and ideas connected to contemporary

¹ Focusing on conceptual change could be seen as a mutually enriching approach to linguistically oriented political studies, such as, in this particular field, the work of Lara Ryazanova-Clarke (2012; 2014) on the national identity and language of Russian-speakers and in Russian politics from the sociolinguistic perspective, or Michael Urban’s (2010) analysis of elite political discourse in Russia.

nationalism(s) in Russia is important because they have concrete implications for the future politics in the country and abroad, even though they should not be assumed to translate into foreign policy decisions directly. The state leadership adopt decisions according to ideational and structural improvisation (Hale et al. 2019) but, when doing so, they also reveal the assumptions about popular moods that they make.

Ideas connected to nationalism in Russia are being developed in the global context, and nationalism has indeed been seen as “rising” elsewhere in the world as well. After the end of the Cold War, and still in the early 2000s, the optimistic interpretation was that the intensification of global interlinkages would serve as a counter-force to “archaic” nationalism: globalisation was considered to inevitably dilute the might of nationalism and render it obsolete. However, the neoliberal “globalism” facilitated an economic crisis, and the long waves of frustration and uncertainty that followed the financial crisis of 2008 throughout the Western world inspired illiberal movements in many societies. During the 2010s in particular, populist forces gained strength both within and outside of parliaments, justifying protectionist, xenophobic, or imperialist claims on the grounds of benefitting the nation, oftentimes successfully. Recently, ethnically motivated conflicts have broken out, and racist tensions have provoked violence and unrest. In this sense, nationalism is seen as a burning issue of our time.

This study, however, perceives nationalism not so much as a topical phenomenon of our time, but rather as a vigorous and perpetual one. Due to its undeniable political might, embedded in reproductions of the nation in everyday life and in its ability to evoke emotions (Billig 1995; Freeden 2005; Brubaker 2004), nationalism is constantly being contested. Like politics in general, this contestation takes place in language, which is why rising nationalism could be better understood as competing nationalist arguments that are currently being re-defined in many places around the world. Various actors take part in producing, maintaining and defending their definition of the nation and its boundaries (Breuilly 1994). As a result of this contestation, nationalism takes different forms in space and time: it emphasises some elements over others and fluctuates, but always prevails.

Contributing to the study of nationalisms in post-Soviet Russia but drawing on the tradition of conceptual history, one of the aims of the dissertation is to understand the uses of the concept of nationalism historically. Language is always layered, and the many continuities and changes in Russian history are reflected in the understandings of the nation today. In Russian history, political language has undergone two fundamental transformations: after the October Revolution in 1917, when the Marxist-Leninist doctrine was adopted to guide and determine the direction of the state and society, and in the late 1980s and early 1990s, before and during the collapse of the Soviet Union, when linguistic practices and public discourses started to seep through the ideological boundaries. Without undermining the drastic significance of both

of those changes as breaks in the continuum, however, they should be understood to some extent as partial and gradual, and definitely as influencing the connotations embedded in key political concepts today.

1.1 NATIONALISM BETWEEN FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC POLICY

When studied in the context of politics, and state power in particular, nationalism can be connected to foreign policy motivations and behaviours as well as domestic legitimacy. As Luke March (2018, 80) suggests, nationalism should not be understood merely as a “driver” for foreign policy but could rather be utilised in analysing the interlinkages between domestic values, regime structures and foreign policy discourses. In this sense, nationalism can be seen as merging the domestic and foreign policy aspects.

In the tradition focusing on the legitimacy of the nationalist argumentation in Russia, the concept of resentment (or ressentiment) is crucial. According to Astrid S. Tuminez (2000, 59–61; 280), resentment helps in conceptualising the relationship between nationalism and Russia’s foreign policy, starting from the defeat in the Crimean War in 1856. The defeat caused widespread national humiliation, which then imbued society with enthusiasm about “Pan-Slav propaganda”. Combined with the structural weakness of the state, resentment made the government turn to an aggressive foreign policy line in the 1870s. Similar patterns emerged after the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, as well as in the crisis leading to World War I in the summer of 1914. Tuminez’s key argument is that resentment nationalism – as such – did not evoke an assertive foreign policy until it was connected to the weakness of the political system. Moreover, the international system is seen as “a determining factor in the rise and impact of aggressive nationalism in Russia in the past”.²

Against this background, it is little wonder that the connection between nationalism and resentment has been intensively discussed since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The shared experience of resentment among the population has been presented as a key feature of and breeding ground for contemporary Russian nationalism (Malinova 2014; Gudkov 2014). In this recent literature, resentment stems from the experience of living through the hard times of the 1990s, combined with the reduction of the state’s status and

² Writing in 2000, Tuminez concluded that post-Soviet Russia had maintained a moderate foreign policy line in regard to nationalist claims, mainly because this factor, the hostile and provocative international environment, had been missing. Therefore, she suggested that Western actors should give Russia “breathing space” by avoiding actions that would intensify Russian humiliation, but should not tolerate actions that “clearly encourage imperial thought and behavior” (Tuminez 2000, 283–284).

influence in world politics after 1991. Whereas the Soviet Union had been a respected (and in many parts of the world, admired) superpower, newly formed Russia had become handicapped in the international competitive arena. For example, in 1993, Russia, the successor to a country that had distributed global aid, had to accept aid from its former ideological enemy, the United States. As a concept, resentment is akin to that of (national) trauma. For example, Pynnöniemi (2021, 314) explains that the contemporary Russian state uses the trauma over the collapse of the Soviet Union to position “historical Russia” in opposition to the current “incomplete” Russia, which creates a conflict between Russia and its neighbours. Each of these conflicts produces a new trauma, resulting in increasing anxiety in society, and a strengthening of state-sponsored narratives and practices interlinking patriotism and militarism.

Many scholars have stressed the responsibility of Western countries in contributing to the national and political humiliation of Russia, to which the country’s political elite have been portrayed as reacting since the mid-2000s. The accounts are not presented to justify Russia’s actions but rather to show the drastic consequences of the fact that, since the end of the Cold War, Russian and Western foreign policy interpretations have been diverging (e.g. Sakwa 2017; Giles 2019). Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes (2019, 15) view resentment in Russia together with similar processes in Eastern Europe and the US and analyse these developments through the prism of imitation. They argue that the Kremlin, after imitating democracy in the 1990s – without creating an accountable government but securing economic privatisation – turned to a “resentment-fuelled policy of violent parody”. With this shift, the Russian political leadership wanted to “hold up a mirror” to the West, discrediting the Western-dominated international order by exposing its fundamental hypocrisy (ibid., 116). For example, in his address on the day of the “reunification” of Crimea in 2014, Vladimir Putin condemned the Western hypocrisy and “double standards” by lengthily juxtaposing the independence of Kosovo to the event at hand. Thus, resentment over the end of the Cold War and its long consequences remains an important “resource” for the Russian state leadership when re-defining the nationalist argument.

Despite the fact that the motivation to study this topic arises partly from Russia’s recent foreign policy behaviour, the publications analyse developments of nationalism mainly in the domestic sphere in the sense that the texts studied are intended primarily for domestic or Russian-language audiences. However, the distinction between foreign and domestic politics is not considered clear-cut, which will also be demonstrated in the study. The domestic circumstances frame and condition the foreign policy choices but do not dictate them – similarly, the prospects of foreign policy affect the way in which domestic matters are depicted and treated.

1.2 CONSERVATISM AS A TEMPORAL CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

Since the mid-2000s, and after 2012 in particular, the Russian political leadership has taken a decisive “conservative turn” that overlaps with the phenomena often described as nationalism. The turn towards conservative thought and politics has also motivated the selection of timeframes in the publications in this dissertation. In this sense, conservatism is a temporal and ideational context for the study, which is why I believe the relationship between the two concepts – nationalism and conservatism – deserves some attention.

The changes that constituted the “conservative turn” took place gradually. In the interpretations focusing on international relations, a clear signal of a “turn” in Russian politics was given at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. President Vladimir Putin’s bitter speech at the event marked the beginning of a new tense phase in US-Russia relations, and the following year, Russian military troops were dispatched outside its borders for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union to fight over the fate of South-Ossetia. In the domestic sphere, the change of attitudes within the state apparatus was, perhaps, less evident but started even before these clear foreign policy measures. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 influenced the domestic environment in Russia through the Kremlin’s interpretation that it was and had to be orchestrated from abroad, which meant that a similar risk of a popular uprising existed in Russia (Krastev & Holmes 2019, 111). After that, the political leadership’s suspicions towards “foreign influence” started to grow and direct the policies towards the media and civil society.

Comparatively speaking, Russia’s economy did not suffer as gravely from the 2008 financial crisis as that of many other countries, but the crisis did end the almost decade-long phase of economic growth that Russians had enjoyed. This amplified the challenges of state legitimacy, articulated in protests among the urban population in the winter of 2011–2012. In the wake of Putin’s third term in 2012, stricter authoritarian policies were introduced to control society and the media. The state authorities continued to work on issues such as patriotic education, unifying the teaching of history and safeguarding the “correct” interpretations of national history. Among the political elite, enhancing the traditional-conservative values of the nation as a key feature of national unity became a priority. In this way, the state interpretation of national cohesion rested upon conservative views, while the societal space where that interpretation could be challenged was heavily constrained.

Nationalism and conservatism share a certain ground when used as analytical concepts. According to Michael Freeden (2005, 205), nationalism is not a “full” distinctive ideology as it lacks a general public policy plan

expressed in terms of major political concepts, and is therefore best understood as a “thin-centred” ideology. It appears within established ideologies, such as liberalism or conservatism, and depending on this “host” ideology, different aspects of nationalism become pronounced. In all variations, however, certain core ideas prevail. First, nationalism is based on the priority of a particular group, the nation. As such, the nation is “a key constituting and identifying framework for human beings and their practices”. Second, positive values are attached to one’s own nation, and third, there is a desire to express the nation in political institutions. Fourth, space and time are considered to determine social identity, and fifth, the sense of belonging and emotion play a significant role in nationalism (ibid., 207). Freeden approaches ideologies as overlapping, fluid, and complex *languages*. In this dissertation, I have adopted Freeden’s view that nationalism, too, should be studied through the “morphology” it creates in combination with the host ideology.

Following Michael Freeden’s line of thought, Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner (2020, 10–12), deconstruct the core of conservatism – the “conservative minimum” – consisting of the notion that people are embedded in community and culture, and that the community is perceived as “organic”. Therefore, societal change should also be taking place “organically”, which is connected to the quest for tradition or religious belief guiding the change. Suslov and Uzlaner summarise that conservatism “emerged as an ideology of comprehensive rebuttal to the philosophy and Weltanschauung of the Enlightenment, and more specifically, to the ideas of rationalism, human perfection, and the capacity and necessity to interfere with and initiate social change in a desired direction”. Thus, conservatism does not resist change or modernisation per se, but these need to take place in compliance with the nation’s “natural” development. These views were intrinsic to the early Slavophile philosophy (see subchapter 5.1), upon which later forms of Russian conservative thought have been built.

Elena Chebankova (2015, 5–6) adds that the conservative positioning is based on the idea of the world being in a permanent state of danger. In the Russian tradition, this danger arises primarily from the struggle over political influence and natural resources in the world. The material collected for publications III and IV, consisting of presidential speeches, endorses the idea of the world as a dangerous place. Publication III quotes Vladimir Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly in 2006 when, while referring to Russia’s military capabilities, he noted that:

[...] we also need to build our home and make it strong and well protected. We see, after all, what is going on in the world. The wolf knows who to eat, as the saying goes. (kremlin.ru 2006)

In her linguistic analysis of the speeches given by the presidential advisor at the time, Vladislav Surkov, Lara Ryazanova-Clarke (2012, 12) mentions his metaphor of the world as a spiderweb, where Russia's ability to maintain its sovereignty depends on whether it chooses to be "a spider or a fly". Such metaphors reflect the view of the world as a "natural" battleground. Thus, the "geopolitical fears" reproduced in the conservative language, combined with the threat of domestic unrest, motivate the need for a strong state that can sustain the national interests even when its sovereignty is challenged.

Regarding the conservative tradition in Russia, Freedén's notion of the nationalist language as homogeneous or pluralistic is illuminating. In a "holistic and homogeneous" reading of the nation, national diversity is rejected, and the ties between the group and its members are intense. In such cases, "the chances are that we are facing an organic theory in which the individual is subservient to a monolithic set of values attached to national wills and purposes" (Freedén 2005, 209). I would propose that the "conservative turn" in Russia, combined with the increasingly authoritarian policies of the state that aim to regulate the private lives of the people (see e.g. Makarychev & Yatsuk 2018), are indeed indicative of a holistic and homogeneous idea of the nation that intensified in Russia during the 2000s.

1.3 RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on these motivations, the overall research problem addressed by this study is the change in nationalist language in Russia during the 2000s and after the so-called "conservative turn" in particular. The problem is further defined in four main research questions, posed and answered in each of the publications included in the dissertation.

At the beginning of the research process, the object of interest was rather ambiguous: How, and why, has nationalism changed in Russia in recent years? As mentioned above, the events of spring 2014 solidified the way to characterise recent political changes in Russia as growing nationalism. However, the comments pointed in several directions: is the Russian political leadership aiming to restore the Soviet Union, or had the Russian state now, by definition, become "chauvinistic" or ethnocentric? (Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2019, 2–3). Moreover, what was meant by the suggestion that Russia had "risen from its knees"³ – to cite a popular patriotic slogan? In media discourses

³ "Rossiya vstala s kolen" in the past tense, or "Rossiya podnimaetsya s kolen" in the present. The phrase has been connected to Vladimir Putin, who, as prime minister, used it as early as September 1999 after the apartment bombings in Moscow. Since then, the expression has surfaced repeatedly to describe

at the time, nationalism seemed to offer an overarching characterisation of the aggressive foreign policy move and its support from the people. Yet, in everyday parlance, the word itself is most often used to criticise and create distance, and its meanings are taken for granted, which is why nationalism as a label did not really explain recent developments in Russia's self-understanding. The scholarly uses of nationalism were also divergent depending on the focus (these will be elaborated on in chapter 3).

Hence, in order to tackle the complex topic, I chose to start by mapping various actors whose ideas could be, and often were, depicted with the concept of nationalism. Consequently, the relations between them would clarify the political contention in the field of nationalism. The starting point was that nationalism could be understood as a feature of the Russian state, as well as the actors who aim to challenge it. In an authoritarian context, state power both promotes its own nationalist argument and aims to master the space available for other actors to present their corresponding arguments. All of these actors, however, appeal to the general population, which is why they could be imagined as sharing a societal space. In order to make sense of this "shared space" between the state authorities and the various nationalist-minded groups and influential individuals, the first publication (I) set out to answer the following question:

1. How do the state and radical nationalist movements use nationalist arguments in contemporary Russia?

In addition, I was interested in how – and why – Russian state policies towards nationalist contention changed in 2014.

The publication shows that nationalist arguments hold strong appeal for many actors in contemporary Russia. These actors have different interpretations of what, exactly, they wish to achieve with nationalist claims, which creates a conceptual and political battle between them. The main dividing line occurs between the state interpretation of the nation and the arguments of radical nationalists, represented in the publication by those who gather annually at an event called the Russian March. The state leadership maintains the official rhetoric of the Russian nation as "multinational", even if ethnic Russians are perceived as the most important nation in this composition. The radical, oppositional nationalists focus on resisting migration, and use blatantly racist rhetoric to drive these messages home. In this sense, Russianness is understood in (narrow) ethnic terms, also treating Russian citizens from the "Southern republics" such as the Caucasus as

various aspects of national wealth, pride, or military capabilities, also sparking criticism among liberal commentators. See e.g. Ryabov & Ryabova 2008, 250; Magarshak 2012.

immigrants.⁴ The publication shows that the state policy towards radical nationalist movements had mainly been to “manage and monitor” them, but after 2014, the state authorities shifted to more direct control over the nationalists in order to ensure dominance in the struggle over nationalism.

In the process of answering the research question posed above, it became necessary to categorise the actors representing nationalist contention in a meaningful way, as state policies vary depending on the challenge that the nationalists pose to state power. Thus, distinguishing “consentful” actors who support the state line from “dissentful”, oppositional ones seemed appropriate for the purposes of the study. At the same time, there were other possible categorisations that sparked my interest. Among those identifying themselves as nationalists, the material revealed a tension between “good” nationalists and “bad” nationalists: stressing the distinction between them was a way to avoid the social stigma connected to the concept of nationalism. However, at the same time, the attitudes attached to the concept had been shifting: a Levada Center opinion poll, published in August 2015, demonstrated an increase between 2009 and 2015 in the proportion of respondents who viewed the word “nationalism” in a positive light – from 9% to 20%. The negative attitudes still formed a clear majority, but they had dropped from 75% to 64%, respectively (Pipiya 2015). Could it be that nationalism was gradually becoming more socially acceptable?

A possible indication of social acceptance, I thought, could be the ways in which the actors described their views publicly. The material collected for the study revealed actors who defined themselves as nationalists, and those who used nationalist argumentation but did not mention the word. Within the timeframe of the study, even President Putin referred to himself as “nationalist” (kremlin.ru 2018a), which I considered a strategy to disarm those who had previously proclaimed themselves nationalists. Yet, in my view, the conceptual battle deserved additional attention.

Reinhart Koselleck explained in 2003 that nationalism, unlike other modern “isms” such as liberalism or socialism, is seldom applied for self-descriptive purposes. According to Koselleck (2006, 218; 235–237), in those rare cases, the concept would only be used by the radical right.⁵ Yet the

⁴ This framing is commonplace in other contexts, too. For example, it is customary to include Chechens or Caucasians in questionnaires examining xenophobic attitudes. See e.g. Pipiya 2019.

⁵ Koselleck’s note appears in the context of his earlier lecture on patriotism, in which he had stated that “Nationalist kann man nach unseren Erfahrungen nicht mehr sein, Patriot zu sein bleibt akzeptabel”. Sixteen years later, in 2003, he returned to the idea: “Es bleibt ein semantisch aufregender Befund, daß das Begriffswort ‘Nationalismus’ - im Gegensatz zu ‘Patriotismus’ - nur selten, und dann nur von radikal Rechten, zur Selbstbenennung ihrer sozialen oder politischen Bewegungen verwendet worden ist” (Koselleck 2006, 218; 235–237). It should be noted, perhaps, that Koselleck’s view on the matter is not limited to discourses in Germany, but has a wider scope of transnational conceptual history.

material I had gathered seemed to paint a more complex picture. Moreover, not only the Russian president, but also US President Donald Trump referred to himself as a “nationalist” around the same time (Baker 2018). These cases hinted that nationalist language could be in flux – at least in Russia, and perhaps even globally. Thus, the observation made in the first footnote of publication I paved the way for the research question addressed in publication II:

2. Who uses the concept of nationalism as self-description in contemporary Russia? How is the concept employed in those contexts exactly, and has that changed during the past decade?

In this way, publication II focused more explicitly on the understandings of nationalism among those who identified themselves with the word nationalist – which meant studying a rather small amount of material but provided valuable insights into the conceptual environment of the topic. The material consisted of a limited number of newspaper texts where a wide variety of voices were represented (not only radical oppositional nationalists, even though they were indeed numerous), which in this way broadened the publication’s scope in comparison to publication I, while at the same time delving deeper into the conceptual battle over the meanings of “nationalist”.

An entire research problem is difficult to define without knowing where it is situated. Answering research questions that target a piece of the puzzle produces results that then help to define the next relevant question until, finally, the whole begins to take shape. In this sense, the process is like a detective following one promising lead after another. At the same time, defining a research question entails defining the context in which a certain phenomenon is understood – and this, too, is a choice that a researcher makes. The results presented in publication I explained state policies vis-à-vis other actors who use nationalist argumentation, but did not shed light on the actual content of “state nationalism”.⁶ What was the specific substance of the nationalist argument that the state actors wanted to dominate the “shared space”? This was left for analysis in publications III and IV, which focused on nationalism explicitly in the context of state power.

In both publications, the emphasis was on the nationalist argument presented, preserved and defended by the state actors in their rhetoric. In this regard, I turned to study presidential discourse, mirroring it in some federal state-level key policy documents. This is not to say that presidential power equals “the state” in contemporary Russia, but rather that the formal state power is vested most visibly in the president’s character. The president is not

⁶ I have applied the term “state nationalism” here to refer to the nationalist argumentation of the actors who hold state power. In the scholarly literature, terms such as state-led nationalism, state patriotism and official nationalism have also been used to describe the phenomenon.

omnipotent, but his rhetoric reflects the dominant views within the state apparatus as long as his power remains the strongest authority.⁷

From the perspective of the dissertation as a whole, it seemed appropriate to situate the assumed (and by now confirmed) change in nationalist language in the 2010s within a wider temporal context of shaping state nationalism. At the beginning of the 2000s, the leadership shift from an ailing Boris Yeltsin to a young and unknown Vladimir Putin signalled a new beginning. The state policies in several areas were redefined, and the authorities began to decisively shape their vision of the unity of the nation. Publication III is based on the president's annual address to the Federal Assembly during the years 2000–2020, tracing how state nationalism was shaped and consolidated in that discourse. The publication appeared as a chapter in the book *Nexus of Patriotism and Militarism in Russia: A Quest for Internal Cohesion*, complementing the collection with an account of contemporary state nationalism in Russia. In order to focus the analysis on the actual content of state nationalism, an approach leaning on the portrayal of national “Self” versus “Others” was adopted. Hence, the publication was designed to map the changes and continuums regarding Russia's relationship to its multi-layered “Others” in both temporal and spatial terms by asking:

3. How did the state leadership portray Russia's “Others” in 2000–2020?

Methodologically, the research was guided by an additional question: Which metaphors are applied to describe the relationship between the “Other” and the “Self”? Avoiding the assumption that only other states could be Russia's “Others”, the analysis detected historical, internal and external others that the presidential discourse also conflates. For example, an external threat to national security is posed by both external and internal Others. The foreign policy context was primary in this publication because Europe, or “the West”, has functioned as the constituent “Other” in the long course of Russian intellectual history (Tolz 2001, 69), and featured as such in the presidential discourse as well.

Publication IV, drafted at the same time as publication III, proceeded to deconstruct the content of the nationalist argument in the presidential discourse but within a more limited time scope, and with more diverse material than that consulted for publication III. After the annexation of Crimea in particular, state nationalism was often discussed in the context of legitimacy: as has been described above, the move was mainly interpreted as an attempt by incumbent leaders to foster their legitimacy by enhancing national pride. Thus,

⁷ The debate on the development of state power goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, but the key issue is that presidential power is not unconditional, and that within the presidential administration, disagreements over certain matters may exist. On this topic, see subchapter 4.1.

the concepts of legitimacy and the “social contract” in the context of Russian domestic politics seemed to be a logical continuation of analysing the nationalist argumentation of the state leadership. At the same time, the “new” Russian nationalism, propagated by the state, could not be reduced to “ethnic” re-interpretations – the state discourse seemed more complex than that. Or, in other words, the “ethnic” component of “Russianness” could be explained in multiple ways. Focusing on the context of domestic developments, publication IV aimed to address the following question:

4. How did the Russian state leadership formulate their nationalist argument in 2012–2019?

More precisely, the publication aimed to probe the explicit character of the Russian nation in the narratives produced by the president. What, in these accounts, does “Russianness” consist of, and who is portrayed as belonging to the nation? Taken together, the research questions in each publication guided the dissertation work and provided results that contribute to the study of nationalism(s) in Russia from the perspective of political language.

When defining research questions, the researcher chooses the context in which to situate the topic, as well as the perspective for studying the issue. By gradually progressing from limited knowledge towards the stage where a certain topic becomes familiar, the limitations of the newly acquired knowledge are also unveiled. In this way, the research question determines the area within which the knowledge is produced. This dissertation aims to produce knowledge about the fluctuations in nationalist language within the context of Russian politics, to which end the research questions approach the problem from four different perspectives.

Table 1 *Research questions*

Publication	Research questions
I	How do the state and radical nationalist movements compete over nationalist argumentation in contemporary Russia? How and why did the state’s stance towards radical nationalists change in 2014?
II	Who uses the concept of nationalism as self-description in contemporary Russia? How exactly is the concept employed in those contexts, and has that changed during the past decade? Did the president’s self-descriptive statements in 2008, 2016 and 2018 inspire others to follow his example?
III	How were Russia’s “Others” portrayed by the state leadership in 2000–2020? Which metaphors were applied to describe the relationship between the “Other” and the “Self”?
IV	How did the Russian state leadership formulate their nationalist argumentation in 2012–2019? What is the explicit character of the Russian nation in the narratives produced by the president? What does “Russianness” consist of in these accounts? Who belongs to the nation?

2 CONCEPTUAL HISTORY AS AN APPROACH TO LANGUAGE IN ACTION

Conceptual history – or the history of concepts – can be understood in a strict sense as a tradition analysing the emergence and development of key concepts in the *longue durée*. In such accounts, the interest lies in the change of powerful yet contested basic concepts in the political and social lexicon (Ifversen 2017, 130–131). In a similar way, the history of ideas can refer in fundamental terms to the field of research that studies and interprets a canon of classic texts (Skinner 2002, 57–58). This dissertation does not analyse the history of any single key concept, even though the problematics arising from the wide range of references to nationalism are present in each publication. Nor is the focus on any canonical texts, and yet the work could be regarded as a contribution to the part of nationalism studies literature that appreciates a historical perspective, and is therefore close to the tradition of intellectual history. The interest in conceptual change has inspired the research questions posed, as well as spurred the interpretation of linguistic action as temporal. To this end, I see the publications as contributing to conceptual history.

In the studies on nationalism(s) in Russia, I believe conceptual history helps in bridging the qualitative gaps between the various understandings of the concept, as well as providing analytical tools for interpreting what the distance between the word and the concept actually implies. In effect, the discipline seems to be gaining ground at present. Timur Atnashev and Mikhail Belizhev (2018, 107–108) write that conceptual history (*istoriya ponyatii*) is “one of the most dynamically developing branches within the contemporary Russian humanities”.⁸ The field, in general, experiences interesting changes. Recently, conceptual historians have developed their studies away from “national” or language-specific perspectives towards comparative and transnational conceptual histories, while the emergence of new digital archives, corpora and technologies has given the discipline renewed impetus.

At the heart of all branches of conceptual history is the idea of concepts forming an intrinsic part of our social reality, and constantly changing. Studying how concepts change over time duly means studying how society and the world around us change. As Kari Palonen (1999, 50; 54–55) has illustrated, conceptual history recognises at least two (alternative) views of the

⁸ Atnashev and Belizhev mention the European University in St Petersburg and journals such as *Logos*, *Polis* and *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* as significant outlets for the study of political languages. For example, in 2011–2012 the latter published a substantial edited volume, *Ponyatiya o Rossii: K istoricheskoy semantike imperskogo perioda*, studying key concepts in the Russian empire.

temporality of conceptual change: that of Quentin Skinner, where conceptual change is advanced by political agents in certain “sudden and successive” moments, and that of Reinhart Koselleck, where concepts are “navigational instruments” of historical movement. Thus, if Skinner is interested in *kairos*-like time, Koselleck embraces *chronos* history, focusing on medium- and long-term change. The selection of texts analysed in the publications that make up this dissertation already suggest that I lean towards Skinner’s (and Palonen’s) interest in conceptual change within political debates. The primary material for the publications in the dissertation derived from sources that appeared within the last 10 years or so, apart from publication III, which studies presidential addresses in 2000–2020. The choice of material is therefore highly contemporary with respect to any tradition of history. And yet, in a more “Koselleckian” way, I have tried to connect the analysis in each publication to the longer historical perspective by discussing, even if briefly, the “baggage” that the key concepts, expressions or metaphors carry.

Despite the different perspectives on the temporality of concepts, Skinner and Koselleck share an understanding of conceptual change as “not only inevitable, but also important, omnipresent, and, in principle, not something to be regretted” (Palonen 1999, 43). Following the rhetorical view of conceptual change, the publications in this dissertation analyse political change through the arguments, metaphors, and narratives in nationalist language. Nationalism is, thus, understood as a frame for political actions, and the linguistic choices of certain actors make those actions visible.

Thus, this dissertation is based on the theorisations that treat a nation “as a political claim rather than an ethnocultural fact”, as Rogers Brubaker (2004, 115–116) writes. In Brubaker’s view, the fruitful question is not “what is a nation” but “how does the category of ‘nation’ work” because it directs scholars to go beyond the substantialist and everyday understandings of nations as naturally existing entities, and to focus instead on the “nation” as a category or term that is used in political language to meet certain ends. In my view, the conceptual history tradition provides solid ground for analysing nationalism “as a way of using that word or category” (ibid., 116), that is, as rhetoric (Calhoun 2007): it encourages an analysis of specific uses of language and how they change over time.

The publications in this dissertation are interested, first and foremost, in the uses of the arguments by which ‘nation’ is produced, explained, and maintained in contemporary Russia. These arguments compete and develop in the sphere of politics and, as depicted above, the research process started with the aim of mapping the space of nationalist contention in politics. To this end, the analysis has benefitted from John Breuilly’s theory of nationalism as a form of politics:

[t]o focus upon culture, ideology, identity, class or modernisation is to neglect the fundamental point that nationalism is, above and beyond all else, about politics and that politics is about power. Power, in the modern world, is principally about control of the state. The central task is to relate nationalism to the objectives of obtaining and using state power. (Breuilly 1994, 1)

In order to fulfil this task, Breuilly suggests a framework of analysis for studying particular cases of nationalism. He describes nationalism as a “political movement seeking or exercising state power and justifying such action with nationalist arguments” – where the nationalist argument, for its part, rests upon three key assumptions: that there exists a nation with an explicit and peculiar character; that the interests and values of this nation take priority over those of others; and that the nation must be as independent as possible (Breuilly 1994, 2–3). The approach is state-oriented, acknowledging that the nationalist argument is advanced by actors that already have state power as well as those who aim to obtain or challenge it.

Breuilly’s understanding of the nationalist argument is intrinsically connected to political action or mobilisation (*ibid.*, 19–20), and his empirical work focuses on the development of nationalist movements from this perspective. Therefore, the idea of nationalist argumentation is complemented here with Brubaker’s (1996, 16) interpretation, which draws on sociological and institutionalist traditions of research and perceives nationalism as a political practice in a somewhat wider sense. Brubaker breaks down different settings in which claims to nationhood are presented, and argues that these can be used, for instance, to challenge the existing territorial and political order; to create a sense of national unity within a given polity; to assert ownership of the polity on behalf of the ‘core nation’ vis-à-vis the whole citizenry of the state; or to mobilise solidarity among the members of ‘the nation’ (Brubaker 2004, 117). In this reading, the nationalist argument has a broader range than when it is perceived merely as a political goal of a certain nationalist movement, and can, in my view, also be applied when the actors are not consciously aiming for political mobilisation.

Building on these approaches, I perceive nationalism as a political act when it appears as an argument, which does not require those using the argument to consider their claims as political. Nationalist arguments can take various forms, as will be shown in the separate publications, but the basic assumption of this research is that language constitutes political action. In his essay on conceptual change, James Farr (1989, 25) writes that “politics as we know it would not only be indescribable without language, it would be impossible”. Embracing Farr’s notion that politics takes place *in* and *through* language, I interpret that the nationalist argument becomes, likewise, visible in the political discourse.

2.1 SEEKING PRECISION, DEFINING A CONCEPT?

Conceptual history as a theoretical approach shows that attempts to define concepts in an exhaustive manner are not only difficult but also unnecessary for the most part. However, as Michael Freeden (2017, 120) notes, the “quest for precision” is different in nature for the scholar who aims to offer a well-thought-out solution to a problem that a certain concept addresses, compared to the political producer of language, for whom the exercise of semantic control signifies ways to shape and direct society. Similarly, attempts to define nationalism or its key components in public speech (studied in publication II) should be approached without aiming to find a “correct” definition. Instead, they provide evidence on the ideas to which the concept is connected in society. In other words, instead of seeking or outlining the explicit meaning of a given concept, the focus of conceptual history is on the changing ways to interpret, contextualise and use key concepts.

The publications comprising this dissertation analyse nationalism in contemporary Russia by mapping the conceptual battles or re-definitions that take place within the nationalist discourse, or the language dealing with the nation and its boundaries. As hinted above, the work follows the theorisation of Quentin Skinner or the so-called Cambridge school, which is interested in the pragmatic and political aspects of concepts. As Ifversen (2017, 130) puts it, “the history of concepts is therefore also a history of what actors do with concepts”. In Skinner’s writings, the sensitivity towards the relationship between language and power is essential, which brings the analytical approach closer to the rhetorical studies:

As we have increasingly been made to see, we employ our language not merely to communicate information but at the same time to claim authority for our utterances, to arouse the emotions of our interlocutors, to create boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and to engage in many other exercises of social control. (Skinner 2002, 5)

All of these cases of linguistic action are crucial in respect of nationalist language, and the publications in this dissertation depict processes of actors claiming authority, including “us” and excluding “Others”, and aiming to evoke emotions in their audiences. For example, publication I, which studies the conceptual battle between radical nationalist groups and the state authorities, exposes the struggle over the “correct” understanding of nationalism as a concept and the “monopoly” over its ownership in politics. In a similar manner, publication II, analysing self-descriptive uses of “nationalist”, demonstrates the struggle to redefine nationalism. In the material collected for the publication, the speakers – not all of whom represent any specific nationalist movements – use various rhetorical means to escape

the social stigma caused by nationalism's negative connotations. For example, some of those describing themselves as nationalists apply the classical rhetorical manoeuvre, paradiastolic redescription, placing a certain concept in a different moral light, usually either "devaluating virtues" or "revaluating vices" (Palonen 1999, 48).

Thus, concepts change through their uses and, perhaps more to the point, there is no history of concepts without their uses in language. I would like to add that this applies not only to empirical concepts, but also to the analytical concepts used in scholarly language. In this sense, my own use of nationalism in publication I offers a chance for self-reflection. In this publication, I describe nationalism as an analytical concept by combining the theory of nationalist argument with Emil Pain's and Aleksandr Verkhovskii's understanding of nationalism as a political tendency that rests upon the "recognition of people as the source of state power and the main agent of the political system". I do not find the chosen definitions problematic as such, as they still seem valid for the purposes of the study. But before presenting them in the publication, I stated that in order to understand the phenomenon better, nationalism as a concept should firstly be defined (p. 223). After the intervening years spent on the topic, I would omit this imperative, as in retrospect it would appear to be "mission impossible". I now believe that formulating a strict definition of nationalism does not necessarily add to our understanding of the phenomenon – rather, that it is possible to broaden and deepen understanding by studying the analytical and empirical applications of nationalism, mapping both the slowly and rapidly changing elements of the concept. Revisiting this publication has shown how, as Freeden (2017, 119) writes, ambiguity, indeterminacy, vagueness, and inconclusiveness "all fly in the face of the precision-seekers".

Focusing on conceptual change in politics, the intention of the actors producing the language is crucial. I have not explicitly deconstructed intentionality at the level of certain speech acts in any of the publications, but it is recognized that the political aspirations of actors shape their nationalist argumentation. In publications III and IV, I analyse how the presidents of Russia have used language to portray the Russian nation. The focus is on the metaphors and conceptual choices that mark Russia's "Others" in relation to the "Self" (III) and on the narratives about the Russian nation, produced in the presidential discourse (IV). Both publications argue that these linguistic strategies are used with a specific intention. Ultimately, all state leaders aim at preserving and strengthening their position in power, which is not always visible at the linguistic level. However, when studying the references to the nation or the othering strategies, more particular goals can be detected. For example, the state leaders wish to enhance national unity among the audience by portraying the nation in a certain way rhetorically, by addressing them with specific concepts or greetings, reminding them of the formative events in the

national past, or condemning what they see as tensions or divisive actions within society.

When studying the narratives about the nation or the “Others” presented to it in language, one cannot measure whether these strategies are actually successful in the sense that they would be intuitively accepted by the people. Nationalist ideologies, like any ideologies, aim at becoming “common sense” – unnoticed, naturalised knowledge. In this way, the actual “influence” of the political language on its audience falls outside the scope of this dissertation project, but the strategies employed by politicians as well as how they change over time can be analysed. Moreover, this inevitably reveals something about the assumptions that politicians make about the mindset of their audience, as they aim to choose the persuasive strategies accordingly.

2.2 THE DISTANCE BETWEEN A CONCEPT AND A WORD

When studying manifestations of nationalist language in a certain temporal and spatial context, the complex relationship between a concept and a word (or term) needs to be taken into account. Following Reinhart Koselleck, a concept may be described as having three dimensions: its reference in the mind, or the concept itself (*Bedeutung* or *Begriff*); its reference in the language, or the word (*Wortkörper*); and its reference in the world, or the object (*Sache*). Concepts are expressed in words, which is why conceptual history focuses on their uses (Ifversen 2011, 69). However, the ways in which concepts become expressed in words are complex to say the least. According to Quentin Skinner (2002, 161–162), the use of words does not equate with understanding concepts, or vice versa. Therefore, he suggests, we should accept that the possession of a concept is “standardly” – but not necessarily or sufficiently – akin to understanding the meaning of the corresponding term. Simply put, a concept may exist in someone’s mind even though they do not employ a certain word to describe it, or there may be words that many have learnt to use in a similar way but cannot explicate their meanings.

Following from this, disagreement about the “meaning” of a concept is actually disagreement about one to three aspects of how the word should be applied: the criteria for applying the word (the “sense” of the word); whether these criteria are evident in a given set of circumstances (the “reference”); and what range of attitudes can standardly be attached to the word (range of “speech acts”). When focusing on nationalism, these three aspects of the meaning of a concept or the application of a word may be helpful. For example, in publication II, which focuses on the term “nationalist” in self-descriptive contexts, I have traced the criteria for applying the word as well as the

circumstances in which it is used in the newspaper material. The speakers aim to give the concept “novel” meanings or, to paraphrase Skinner, to widen the range of criteria for using the word. In this way, they also link non-standard attitudes to the word “nationalist” and avoid the negative connotation or even social stigma connected to it.

The strong negative connotation of nationalism in everyday language further complicates studying the relationship between the word and the concept because the actors who participate in the shaping of nationalist discourses in society may not perceive their role that way. Pauli Kettunen (2018, 342) notes that “those who use nationalist language often fail to recognize it”, explaining that “nationalism is the rhetoric of nation, yet this rhetoric is often vigorously opposed to ‘nationalism’”. Thus, discourses that are vital for studying nationalism may not include the word at all. This is often the case when political actors create, maintain and defend the boundaries of belonging to the nation in their parlance. For example, publication IV studies the development of narratives about “Russianness” in presidential speeches, analysing the references to the nation (or “us” as a nation, or “Russians”) in the years 2012–2019. I approach these texts as evidence of the contents of state nationalism, even though the word “nationalism” is basically absent from the material. The more complex question is actually how the vocabulary of nationalist language is formed, which words can be included, and what the internal logic between those words is.

Drawing on all the material gathered for the publications, I have compiled two sketches of semantic networks of nationalism to illustrate the broad scope of nationalist language. These sketches are by no means explicit or definitive, but they demonstrate a way of organising words when the analytical key concept does not necessarily feature in the research material. Semantic networks (or semantic fields) provide analytical tools for mapping relationships between concepts. Jan Ifversen (2011, 71–72) categorises these relationships as syntagmatic or horizontal, and paradigmatic or vertical. In the former case, the words are associatively interlinked, whereas in the latter case, words can replace each other according to the linguistic rules (for example, an *ism* can replace another *ism* in a sentence that is still linguistically correct). This means that the words are chosen by *combining* and *selecting*, respectively.

In Figure 1., I have depicted examples of syntagmatic concepts that have an associative relationship to nationalism. In this sense, mapping the syntagmatic concepts may shed light on the contexts in which the concept of nationalism is used. For example, nation or nationalism appears together with the names of nationalities and states (Russia, Russian, Ukraine, Ukrainian), with certain adjectives that describe its value (healthy, harmful), or with words that describe the position of the speaker in relation to the nation (we, us, our). Identifying words connected associatively to each other – with nationalism at

the core – helps in cultivating an understanding of nationalist language even when the word nationalism is replaced with another paradigmatic word.

Figure 1. Examples of syntagmatic concepts of “nationalism”.

Here, I have merely visualised the words connected to nationalism but semantic networks could prove valuable in other ways, too. When applying digitally assisted studies that trace how frequently certain words appear with each other (see subchapter 4.3), “manually” or intuitively conducted semantic networks could help in formulating the hypothesis.

Figure 2. demonstrates the paradigmatic concepts – in this case, other isms. I have positioned the concepts roughly according to the attitudes related to them, placing the positively loaded concepts above the negatively loaded ones. In addition, they are organised temporally, from left to right (very approximately) according to their presence in the Russian language. The underlining depicts the break from the Soviet discourses to the post-Soviet era: for example, internationalism as a concept is no longer in use since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the official discourse has adopted a concept of multinationalism – as publication IV shows. Paradigmatic concepts feature strongly in the analysis in publication II: the speakers in the material often chose to explain the meanings of nationalism by referring to parallel or opposite ism concepts.

Figure 2. Examples of paradigmatic concepts of “nationalism”.

There is no standard way of drafting a semantic network, and the overall aim is to better understand the scope of nationalist discourses. Yet more importantly, when analysing the data, I have benefitted in large part from the “traditional” conceptual history of the words that appear in the vocabulary of nationalism, of which nation is the most important.

For a long time in Russian history, words like nation, national and nationality were more commonplace than the “ism” – which was the case elsewhere in Europe too (Kurunmäki & Marjanen 2018, 263–264). Aleksei Miller, who has studied the history of the concept of nation in the Russian empire, has shown how the two words describing the nation – *narod* and *natsiya* – emerged in the Russian language, and how the nouns *narodnost'* and *natsional'nost'* were first introduced as equivalents of the French *nationalité* (Miller 2012, 23–25). Of these words, *narod* has a longer history, and as Oleg Kharkhordin (2005, 93) notes, the Russian words nation (*narod*) and nature (*priroda*) are both related to the verb *rodit'*, to give birth. In many Romance languages, too, there is an etymological connection between natural, natality, and nation.

In one of the most well-known manifestations of Russian state nationalism, the doctrine that later became known by the label of “official nationality”, the three pillars of Russian national ideology were Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality (*pravoslavie, samoderzhavie, narodnost'*). The wording introduced by Count Sergei Uvarov, the minister of education after the Decembrist uprising in the 1820s, aimed to stress the national consolidation, and to simultaneously condemn the calls for constitution and national representation that had been made by the liberals (Miller 2012, 24). Serhii

Plokhly points out that Uvarov, like his contemporaries, wrote his programme in French, using the word *nationalité*, which his clerks then translated as *narodnost*. In Uvarov's triad, "nationality" stood for "*the traditional way of life* that was supposed to ensure the continuity of the other two key elements of Russian identity – religion and autocracy – in an age shaped by new European ideas" (Plokhly 2017, 83, italics added). In this way, *narodnost* was not arguing for popular representation of the nation, as in the European discourses of the time, but for supporting the tsar's authority (ibid., 83–84; see also subchapter 5.1).

At the time of the "official nationality" policy, liberal ideas were often expressed with the words *natsiya* and *natsional'nost*, which is also why those particular terms were heavily censored until the 1880s. After that, however, they became more popular than the parallel terms *narod* and *narodnost*, but as they were still connected to the idea of reforms, these concepts were pushed to the margins by the end of the century (Miller 2012, 24; 40). Partly for the same reasons, in the late 19th century, nationalism was an explicitly negative term. Philosopher Vladimir Solovyov (cited in Miller 2012, 39) compared the difference between nationality (*natsional'nost*) and nationalism (*natsionalizm*) to that between "personality and egoism". In a similar way, the early uses of nationalism elsewhere in Europe were as words of abuse, often targeted at political opponents (Kurunmäki and Marjanen 2018, 264).

Hence, the negative connotation of *nationalism* is deeply rooted in Russian history. Records of the evolution of this vocabulary after the October Revolution and during the Soviet years are more fragmented, but the censorship of *natsiya* as well as the negative connotations of the concept remained until the very end of the Soviet era (Miller 2016, 89). In the official Soviet parlance, nationalism and cosmopolitanism figured as the negative counterparts of the desired modes of thought and action, patriotism and internationalism (Kettunen 2018, 349). In this way, the coupling of nationalism with cosmopolitanism – which carried a clearly anti-Semitic meaning – reinforced the completely negative attitudes connected to it.

All language is historical and the way we understand concepts today is influenced by previous uses of those same concepts, even if this influence is not necessarily direct. For this reason, familiarizing oneself with the history of key concepts is essential in order to grasp the way in which these concepts are used in the present. In chapter 5, I will discuss the historical context of nationalism in Russia with the help of prior research literature, in order to contextualise the changes in the contemporary language temporally.

2.3 THE POSITION OF THE RESEARCH AND THE RESEARCHER

As discussed in this chapter, the dissertation at hand draws on the traditions of contemporary and conceptual history. Such branches of history are multifaceted but, at the same time, the dissertation with its four publications falls between several disciplines. The emphasis on political changes in a contemporary society suggests that the studies could contribute to political science. This is particularly visible in publications I and IV, where the former discusses dissentful and consentful political contention between the state and nationalist actors, while the latter pays attention to the concept of legitimacy in relation to the nationalist argumentation of state authorities. Analysing the means of “othering” in the context of defining the nation, which is conducted in publication III, and perhaps the dissertation as a whole, has relevance for the study of international relations: understandings of nationalism in Russian politics have practical implications for the foreign policy measures that the regime takes.

The interdisciplinary nature of this dissertation project is also demonstrated in the choice of journals: *Nationalities Papers* publishes multidisciplinary work on nationalism, migration, and ethnic conflict with a geographical emphasis on Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, and Eurasia; *Demokratizatsiya* deals with a wide range of political, economic and social issues in the area; *Contributions to the History of Concepts* has a clear focus on empirical and theoretical studies within conceptual history, and is not limited to any particular region. The edited volume *Nexus of Patriotism and Militarism in Russia: A Quest for Internal Cohesion* (Pynnöniemi 2021), for its part, combines social and political sciences with cultural studies to analyse different dimensions of patriotism and militarism in contemporary Russia.

Clearly, the dissertation can be read as a contribution to area studies. Russian studies (or “post-Soviet” or Eurasian studies) has developed into a distinctive discipline since post-war Western academia recognised the need to analyse the Soviet Union in a more systematic manner. The Cold War climate created a concept of “Kremlinology”, referring to Western scholars interpreting the limited sources of information on Soviet politics and society. Thus, the “outside” researcher has had a specific role in Russian studies, not always free from moral undertones. In the 1990s and early 2000s, many scholars, particularly in the West, perceived the former Soviet republics as struggling “on their way” from a communist system to a democratic and market-oriented liberal one. By now, scholars in area studies have generally rejected this transition theory with its normative and linear presumptions. Recent decades have also shown that the reality in many of the former Soviet Union countries has developed along different lines.

Selecting a topic and positioning it within a certain research tradition is always a subjective decision guided by the researcher's expectations. Being a "foreign" researcher vis-à-vis the research topic is not an impediment and should not be approached as such, but nationalism is a phenomenon often detected "somewhere else" and it is therefore important to recognise the criticism and distance embedded in the concept. As Michael Billig (1995, 55) has pointed out, practices, utterances or policies that "we" easily condemn as nationalism in another cultural context appear as healthy patriotism in our "own" context. Moreover, nationalism is connected to intuitive and unconscious patterns of thought, which is why, for example, one could ask whether I pay excessive attention to certain aspects of Russian national narratives because they appear unfamiliar to me due to my cultural background in a small, secular, politically Western-integrated nation-state. How do the Finnish-Russian foreign policy relationship, national history culture, or representations in Finnish society of Russia as a country direct my interpretations? These questions cannot be answered definitively, if at all, but it is important to remain sensitive regarding the researcher's frames of interpretation. Yet the view of a "foreigner" may also prove rewarding as "outside" observations are inherently comparative: the researcher continuously mirrors the object of the study in personal experiences and preconceptions based on their own background.

However, the very assumption that nationality "inherently" determines the way a researcher interprets cultural codes hints at methodological nationalism. In general, the concept refers to the understanding of the nation as the "natural" social and political form of the modern world (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002; see also Turoma & Waldstein 2016, 6). Avoiding methodological nationalism means accepting that there is no distinctive or standard "Russian" way to interpret social reality that differs from "foreign" or "Western" interpretations. The nation-state structure upholds certain cultural patterns that have an influence on "us" as an in-group – the education system, media environment, cultural history, religion, habits and social norms, among other things – but assuming that the only or most significant in-group in this sense would be the "nation" is an oversimplification (see also Kalela 2012, 78; Brubaker 1996). Moreover, expecting that ways of thinking are different outside and inside any state borders downplays the diversity of researchers as subjects, as well as the diversity among those they study, and simultaneously upholds the idea of groups such as nations as fixed.

With the new social history paradigm, historians have become increasingly interested in ownership and representation. The question of whether "an outsider" can truly understand a group they do not identify with is worth asking, but it should never discourage an attempt to do so. In this regard, it needs to be stressed that there is no unified understanding of any issue "inside" the national community. The task of the "foreign" researcher, in this case, is to

maintain a reflective approach while not expecting to find any single voice of “Russianness”. In a way, ownership is also interwoven with the overall argument of this dissertation: despite the recurring and vigorous attempts to do so, claiming full ownership over “nationalism” is not possible. No actor in the political field, or in the scholarly debate, may exercise a monopoly over the definition of the nation.

Conducting research in a foreign language is a common practice in the (increasingly anglophone) academic world. In this dissertation, I have chosen to analyse the material in Russian and to write in English – neither of which is my native language. However, I believe working with several languages is not problematic but fruitful if one accepts that the transmission of thought between languages is often difficult, but usually possible, as well as intellectually intriguing. I began my studies within the field of Russian translation, which may have enhanced my interest in the complexity of concepts and preconditions of interpretation. Among the contemporary translation theory paradigm, two aspects are salient: the context of the text itself, as well as the cultural, temporal and spatial context in which the text is produced. Both aspects are essential for conceptual historians.

3 NATIONALISM AS AN ANALYTICAL CONCEPT

The previous chapter touched upon the empirical challenges arising from the negative connotations and the ambiguous meanings attached to the concept of nationalism in public discourse. However, the problem is not merely an empirical one. In everyday language, nationalism functions as a concept of disapproval, which also affects its use as an analytical concept. After all, researchers themselves are not only surrounded by but also constitute a part of the society in which public discourse is produced. Scholarly language does not seem to influence the ways in which nationalism is used, and nor have scholars focusing on nationalism been that interested in “the ordinary uses” of the concept. Pauli Kettunen (2018, 342) has suggested that the research on nationalism ought to take these issues more seriously. Conceptual history as a discipline has been interested in the divisions between analytical and practical uses of the language.

In this chapter, I will delve into the various uses of nationalism in academic writing, starting from the notion that nationalism is not only understood differently in everyday language and in academic terms, but that there are various disagreements over the concept within scholarly writing. The “conceptual battle” over nationalism is not only taking place in public and political discourses, but different academic disciplines emphasise different aspects, and hence nationalism as an analytical concept is also contested. From this perspective, the chapter presents a specific reading of the literature focusing on the analytical uses of the concept of nationalism in this (admittedly rich, even crowded) academic field. Therefore, it also functions as a further elaboration on the position of this dissertation within the research tradition.

Historian Jorma Kalela (2012, 2–3) has depicted history research as a “social process of history-making” where it is not only historians who play their part (in fact, historians’ role is very limited in respect of how their findings can influence the everyday perceptions of the past). In Kalela’s conceptualisation, scholarly histories interact with public and popular histories, produced within society and the media, as well as various communities such as family, neighbourhood, and workplace, respectively. It is the interplay between all of these “histories” that constitutes “the practical context” of scholars’ work. In a similar way, those studying nations and nationalism work *within* the everyday discourses on the topics, and their ideas rarely penetrate the “common sense” level, or any level of the public discourse on the nation for that matter. In his study on banal nationalism, Michael Billig (1995, 14–15) demonstrated how the idea of the nation in society is both

obvious and obscure: it is being reproduced in everyday language and practices in such a subtle way that resisting the idea of nation as “natural” becomes difficult, and remains like that even for scholars who study nationalism as ideology.

Regarding the concept of nationalism, I sense certain differences between the everyday interpretations, the media, and within different branches of what could be called “professional” language: the scholarly language within academia, broadly understood, and the language of “policy analysis”, located between the academic uses and media discourses. In the media, the various aspects of nationalism as a concept are rarely considered, and the way it is applied reflects the commonsensical uses. Among the “professionals”, meaning those studying nationalism and its manifestations in society or politics, some attention is paid to the concept itself, but the interpretations vary. The various aspects embedded in the concept are rarely present in the short policy analysis commentaries, perhaps because they are closer stylistically to the typical media discourses.

As a subject of study, nationalism has undergone several evolutions from the primordial interpretations of nations being “eternal” to the modernist re-interpretations of nationalism as a socially and politically construed element of modern societies. Research on nationalism has been growing since the 1970s, with the 1980s seeing the rise of what Umut Özkırımlı (2010, 169) described as “new” approaches to nationalism, illuminating many spheres where the idea of nation had remained “taken for granted”. At the same time, nationalism remains a crucial and contested concept in research communities dedicated to history, social and political sciences, as well as area studies. These disciplines have overlapping but also conflicting understandings of what nationalism as an analytical concept can refer to, which creates confusion. Moreover, there are, of course, diverging views within disciplines. A fruitful way to approach these disagreements – instead of seeking clear-cut definitions – could be to map the debates, discussions, or contexts that researchers contribute to when conducting research on nationalism.

Contemporary scholars of nationalism theory approach the concept in a broad sense, referring to it as a naturalised view of a world composed of nation-states. Umut Özkırımlı (2010, 2) summarises that nationalism does matter – “as the fundamental organising principle of the inter-state order, as the ultimate source of political legitimacy, as a readily available cognitive and discursive frame, as the taken-for-granted context of everyday life”. Brubaker (1996, 15–16) has noted that the substantialist interpretation of nations as real entities is also held by many “modernists” and “constructivists” in the field of nationalism studies – which is, I would think, further evidence of how nationalism *as a practice* merges with nationalism *as a theory*. Despite scholars’ continued attempts to unpack these taken-for-granted, national frames for politics, economies, and culture, certain concepts seem to remain

“charged” with nationalism, as Pauli Kettunen (2018, 343) observes. For example, he writes, “the notion of society as an integrated holistic entity within the borders of the nation state appears not only in public debates but also in scholarly texts, and especially in comparative studies.” Thus, the nation as a “cognitive and sociopolitical category” (Brubaker 1996, 18) is so pervasive that even the scholars studying it do not always detect the settings where it appears.

Nevertheless, one should note that the tendency to resist these “taken-for-granted” schemes of nationhood has become more pronounced in research outside the branches focusing on nations, along with increasing attention to critical globalisation studies as a part of the transnational paradigm in history and social sciences (e.g. Kalela 2012, 78–79). In other words, many contemporary nationalism theorists reject the interpretation of nationalism as a certain stage of history that started when the system of modern nation-states emerged and ended with the intensification of globalisation.

A certain tension exists between interpretations that perceive nationalism as a construct and those that wish to study it as a practice. Emil Pain and Sergei Fediunin (2018, 1–2; 53–71; 67) criticise the modern constructivism paradigm in nation and nationalism studies for “excluding” the material factors, and for the “engineered blurriness in nation and nationalism studies”. They posit that by focusing on discourses and themes such as transnational identities or methodological nationalism, scholars do not take the present crisis of nation-state seriously, thereby “‘guarding’ the theory against consistently irritating new challenges to practice”. In a somewhat similar way, Breuilly (2013, 14) advises scholars of nationalism not to treat it merely as “a reflex of non-national material and ideal interests such as class or race or state”, but warns them at the same time about “going to the other extreme”, which would interpret nationalism as “some deeply felt idea, sentiment, or political commitment that operates independently of, even against, such interests”. Instead, Breuilly suggests that “a detailed consideration of how nationalism works historically in particular regions and periods” is the most reasonable way to map the different aspects of the concept.

I contend that the critique of constructivist and “new” approaches to nationalism relates to the tendency of some liberal historians and academics to implicitly or explicitly condemn the political manifestations they study. As Brubaker (2004, 118) puts it when describing academics’ attitudes within the social sciences and humanities in the US, invocations of nationhood are often perceived as “*dépassé*, parochial, naïve, regressive, or even dangerous”. Also Craig Calhoun (2007, 7) criticises such accounts for treating nationalism as “sort of an error smart people will readily move beyond – or an evil good people must reject” which leads to underestimating the importance of national

solidarities in the contemporary world. Thus, in general, the concern has been registered by many, and the debates on the topic are expanding.⁹

I would hesitate to accept the claim that scholars focusing on discourses, in general, treat them as distinct from social reality, or “exclude” the material factors, as Pain and Fediunin suggest. On the contrary, many who analyse concepts, political language, or discourse are primarily interested in the political change in social reality. As chapters 2 and 4 argue, language creates the frames within which political practices are realised. Focusing on the linkages between nationalism and foreign policy, Luke March (2018, 95) states that only those accounts that consider “both the ideational influence of nationalism and the policy context of its proponents” can actually be successful – which is an appropriate reminder indeed, but, in being ordered to do this, the perception of nation as being socially construed need not be abandoned.

Hence, scholars who study nations and nationalism do not necessarily share an understanding of the concepts they use. In a similar vein, there are different interpretations of nationalism in the field of post-Soviet and Russian studies. Marlene Laruelle (2019, 5) points out that in studies on Russian nationalism, the recent trend has been towards “‘exiting the political’ and ‘entering the social’”, that is, understanding nationalism in broader terms and focusing on the societal and everyday aspects of the phenomenon – which, to a certain extent, follows the paradigm shifts within social sciences and history. Regarding the theories of nationalism in general and nationalism in Russia in particular, the tension between “bottom-up” and “top-down” nationalism is another recurring topic for (fruitful) disagreement among political scientists. Political leaders and elites inarguably have an impact on how nationalist sentiments develop in society, but that impact is always conditional. Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (2018, 6–7) propose that the “top-down” influence, exercised by state power, cannot be successful unless there are attitudes “at the bottom” of society that it can tap into.

While this dissertation is interested in political language, with two of the publications analysing the language of high political leadership, I do not assume that this is simply where nationalism is “produced” and then “transferred” to society. The ideational influence does not consist of one-way channels, and nor are its directions clear-cut. Moreover, and more fundamentally, the logic of national solidarities goes far beyond the texts produced to meet certain political ends. That said, studying the language of political leaders is meaningful even when top-down influence is not expected, as it inevitably tends to describe the perceptions that the state authorities have about popular moods and societal attitudes. Explaining his focus on the public

⁹ A recent example of this kind of debate could be Yael Tamir’s book *Why Nationalism* (2019), in which she proposes that liberals should “reclaim” nationalism from right-wing actors and redirect its political power to progressive ends.

political narratives themselves instead of their external reception, Edwin Bacon (2012, 769) notes that the narratives always say something about their narrators: “to know someone’s story” helps to make sense of their actions more accurately.

Conceivably, the Russian media and academia have a different view compared to their Western counterparts on the concept of nationalism. Of course, national borders do not define schools of research – Russian studies is and has been an international field, Western scholars study Russian-language sources, and Russian scholars publish in other languages. But the fact that the social sciences and humanities in Russia have developed without ideological preconditions set by the Soviet government for around 30 years does influence those fields today – as do the recent political and ideological limitations on academic freedom in Russia (see e.g. Olimpieva 2021, 12–15; 31). The Western tradition of Russian studies is influenced by its past in another way: the political context of the Cold War years intensified the need to understand Soviet society and foreign policy in Western societies. Marlène Laruelle (2019, 1) writes that Western scholarship on Russia has always been interested in national identity issues, “both to explain Russia’s ‘difference’ from the West and as a part of a mirror game with Russia’s national tradition of debating the so-called ‘Russian Idea’”. In her genealogy, she depicts how the Western tradition of studying nationalism in the Soviet Union and Russia actually began in the 1960s with the emphasis on Slavophilism, Pan-Slavism, and conservatism, but in the 1970s and early 1980s the focus shifted to the contemporary society, and the “revival” of Russian nationalism (*ibid.*, 1–5).

In the wake of perestroika, a specific dual schema in the study of Russian nationalism(s) was born: the Western scholarly literature became divided between the “good” forms of non-Russian nationalism within the USSR, and the “bad” ethnic Russian nationalism. Laruelle (2019, 1–5) argues that this schema has, to a certain extent, prevailed ever since. In the 1990s in particular, forms of nationalism inside the Russian Federation were interpreted through the lens of “Russia’s problem”, but nationalisms in, for instance, the Baltic states, Ukraine, Georgia or Moldova were seen as necessary or natural phases contributing to the democratisation process of the respective countries. Non-Russian nationalisms within the Russian Federation were approached in a similar way. This critique proposed by Laruelle is in line with the overall critique of transition studies regarding the post-Soviet space. The critical examination of nationalism studies among Western scholars also confirms that the choice of research topics is always made in a specific temporal and spatial context.

3.1 ETHNIC, CIVIC, IMPERIAL?

The model of distinct civic and ethnic nationalisms has long played a part in nationalism studies, even though it is usually agreed that the dichotomy fails to explain the complex reality. In this categorisation, civic nationalism is based on the political agreement that holds people together, whereas the ethnic version stems from tradition, kinship, and cultural ties. A key problem arising from the ethnic-civic (or “political-cultural”) categorisation is that it often presents variants of civic nationalism as benign and legitimate, whereas ethnic nationalism is portrayed as backward and illegitimate. Following the theorisation of Hans Kohn, civic types are characteristic of Western contexts, while ethnic variants can be found within “non-Western” nations (Özkırımlı 2010, 35–37; see also Kemiläinen 1964, 139–141). Civic or statist nationalisms have also been portrayed as tolerant and peaceful, even if conflict may arise from attempts to assimilate national minorities into the civic nation (Goode 2019, 142). The dichotomy still appears frequently in academic and political debates, which Paul Goode (2019, 142), leaning on Edward Koning’s work, attributes to its usefulness in categorising and classifying nation-building *policies* – “even if it is a blunt and misleading tool for characterizing nations”.

In the Russian case, the variants appear in the context of domestic nation-building strategies, and especially in the conceptual choices in that field. In the Russian language, there are two words to describe “Russianness”: *russkii* and *rossiiskii*.¹⁰ It has long been thought that the former stresses linguistic and ethno-cultural connotations whereas the latter refers to Russians in the sense of Russian citizens – but these concepts, too, are in flux. In post-Soviet Russia, Boris Yeltsin clearly emphasised the rhetoric of *rossiiskii*, whereas Vladimir Putin has been much less consistent, and broadened the range of *russkii* in particular, as publication IV (p. 527) shows. The increasing usage of *russkii* in state discourse after 2014 has been analysed as a marker of an ethnonational shift in the Kremlin’s policy, or the “ethnification” of Russian nationalism (Teper 2016; Kolstø 2016, 18). Marlene Laruelle (2016a) points out that in the Kremlin’s usage, *russkii* does not function primarily in the nation-building arena, but is used to reinforce the historical connection of Eastern Slavs:

Insisting on Kiev, Crimea, and Sevastopol as russkii does not underline an ethnic nationalism that would discriminate against non-ethnic Russian citizens of Russia. Rather it is the continuation of an old historical theme, which stipulates that Eastern Slavs in their three modern national units come from the same cradle, Kievan Rus’.

¹⁰ Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (2018, 9) raise an important point in that while the Russian language allows one to choose either a standardly “ethnic” or “civic” term, it also makes it impossible for a Russian speaker *not* to choose the emphasis: “there is no ‘neutral’ term to describe Russianness”.

Historically speaking, Kiev is indeed a russkii land, whereby russkii is understood in the original sense of Eastern Slavs, not the modern Russian state. The notion of the “reunification of Russian lands” (sobranie russkikh zemlei) is thus not evidence of ethnic irredentism but a ghost from the imperial past. (Laruelle 2016a)

The Kremlin’s rhetorical choices have several audiences, and “ethnification” is different in nature vis-à-vis each of them. As Laruelle (ibid.) puts it, “[t]he semantic uses of *russkii* and *rossiiskii* are not mutually exclusive but overlap and diverge depending on the context in which they are used”. Indeed, the way that concepts are applied in practice reveals how they are perceived, because these uses may – and often do – change over time even though the words remain the same.

In the context of domestic politics, conceptual ambiguity prevails. The Constitution of the Russian Federation refers to Russians as a “multinational nation” (*mnogonatsional’nyi rossiiskii narod*), even if it is often stated that today’s Russia resembles a nation-state with its 80% majority of “ethnic Russians”. The official discourse also recognises ethnic Russians as the “state-forming nation” (*gosudarstvoobrazuyushchaya natsiya*) in the history of the Russian state, an idea that gained popularity for the first time in the Russian Empire by the beginning of the 20th century (Miller 2012, 48). Publications III and IV, analysing presidential discourse, illustrate the importance of this theme: on the one hand, the historical multinationality of Russia is portrayed as the “strength and beauty” of the country, but on the other hand, the Russian language, culture and ethnicity are simultaneously stressed as uniting factors for all Russian citizens, and therefore Russians are portrayed as “*primus inter pares*”.

A few remarks about the field of nationalities policy will help to contextualise this ambiguity. Publication IV mentions the political attempt to “clarify” the concept of the Russian nation, voiced for the first time during a meeting of the Council for ethnic relations in 2016. The president supported the idea, stating that a new law “on the Russian nation” would be needed. Two key figures behind the project, Vyacheslav Mikhailov and Valery Tishkov, served as nationalities ministers in the 1990s,¹¹ and both have since promoted an interpretation of Russians as a special kind of civic nation (Goode 2019, 150–152.) In December 2018, the amendment to the Strategy of Nationalities Policy was accepted, and the document now defines the Russian nation as “a community of free equal citizens of the Russian Federation of various ethnic, religious, social and other affiliations, with civic consciousness

¹¹ At the beginning of Boris Yeltsin’s presidential era, the emphasis was on the civic *rossiiskii* nation-building strategies, but then gradually shifted towards ethnic and imperial conceptualisations of the state when the influence of the liberals in the government decreased (Shevel 2011, 189–190).

(*obladayushchih grazhdanskim samosoznaniem*)” (kremlin.ru 2018b, chapter 6). Legal language refers to a classic civic nation-state, but its impact and connection to the actual policies and practices of nation-building remain unclear. The designers of the “civic” nation-building model have not avoided ethnic undertones when elaborating on their ideas.¹² The question remains as to why the political administration insists on a civic model of nation-building at the level of language when it simultaneously wants to embrace a clear hierarchical vision of the nation – and, as Konstantin Zamyatin (2018, 50) has argued, pursues assimilative tactics, for example in its language policies. In the new constitution, the Russian language is defined not only as the official language of the federation, but as “the language of the state-forming nation” (Gosudarstvennaya дума 2020, article 68, part 1).

Whereas “civic nationalism” can be explained through civic participation, characterised in the institutional belonging of the nation, the “ethnic” component of nationalism remains much less concrete. In the case of post-Soviet Russia, there are several possible ways to understand ‘nation’ in ethnic terms. Oxana Shevel (2011, 180; 185–189) proposes three alternative readings of “ethnic Russianness”: the nation as a community of ethnic Russians; a community of Eastern Slavs; or a community of Russian-speakers. She notes that these categories “differ substantially in terms of their core beliefs, internal logic, implications for Russia’s relations with neighbouring states, and for the territorial integrity of the Russian state itself”. The remark on territorial integrity is interesting as only the idea of the nation as a community of Russian-speakers refers to a community broader than that encompassed by the borders of the Russian Federation, and hence it does not threaten the territorial integrity of the country – unlike the other two ethnic conceptualisations of the nation.

In Shevel’s perception, the idea of nation as a restricted community of ethnic Russians is not very popular (*ibid.*, 186). These attitudes are challenging to measure, but many researchers of post-Soviet Russian nationalism support the view of a more inclusive interpretation of “Russianness” being mainstream. Marlene Laruelle (2020; see also 2019, 7) lists four variants of contemporary nationalisms in Russia: imperialist nationalism, the supporters of which wish to re-create the Soviet Union; “pure” ethnic nationalism that would exclude Caucasia from the Russian state; eastern Slavic nationalism that would include Ukrainians and Belarusians in the Russian nation; and “*rossiiskii* nationalism”, or statist nationalism, which is satisfied with the current borders of the Russian Federation but has reservations about

¹² In 2019, Valery Tishkov explained his vision of the Russian identity: according to him, the Russian nation is not only a political and civic entity, but also united by historical values, ethnic culture, and even the Sochi Winter Olympics and the “re-unification” of Crimea: “These two events played a very important role in the growth of common patriotism, self-consciousness, solidarity, and unity” (Tishkov 2019).

migrants. She suggested that the first three models represent minority views, while the statist version would be “the mainstream” interpretation today. As Laruelle (ibid.) and Torbakov (2015, 455) note, (ethnic) nationalist actors themselves mix the imperial and ethnonationalist arguments, as well as the concepts of *russkii* and *rossiiskii*, which is why any clear-cut definitions of those labels or concepts are quickly prone to becoming outdated and imprecise.

Thus, the many ambiguities regarding theorisations of “ethnic”, together with the inconsistent policies in nation-building and, lastly, the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Ukraine, have encouraged scholars of post-Soviet Russian nationalisms to seek new analytical frames. One of the revisited concepts is “imperial nationalism”, which hints at both the (external) borders of the Russian state as well as the ways in which the multinational nation is perceived within that state. For example, Eduard Ponarin and Mikhail Komin (2018a, 51) posit that imperial nationalism is better suited to analysing Russia’s developments after 2014 because it combines “elements of civic nationalism with ethno-symbolism”, and holds that “the national community is not restricted to the territory of the state”.

In the context of contemporary Russia, “imperial” highlights the “multinational” characteristic of the nation; the primacy of ethnic Russianness; the expansionist foreign policy together with the discourse on “compatriots”; and the creation of “an inimical image of a geopolitical rival”. All of these can be presented as components of the post-Soviet (and post-2014) Russian nationalism that, according to Ponarin and Komin (2018a, 61), the political elite has deliberately chosen. In assessing the novelty and added value of “imperial nationalism”, the attitudes attached to the analytical concepts become crucial. The civic-ethnic divide has been criticised on account of its embedded “moral” orientation, but the concept of empire also has a strong negative connotation, which makes “imperial nationalism” an interesting alternative to the dichotomy. For example, Emil Pain (2016) has described similar developments as “Russia’s imperial syndrome”, stressing the anti-Western content of imperial nationalism (here, the metaphor of sickness emphasises the risks that Pain sees as embedded in this current, but also contributes to the negative value orientation of the concept of imperial).

In this way, the scholarly discussion on nationalism is interwoven with the studies on empire that have been revived during the 2000s. When the Soviet Union – “the last empire” – collapsed, the view of empire as a phenomenon of the past¹³ grew more commonplace, but as Sanna Turoma and Maxim Waldstein (2013, 1) note, the interest towards empire and the imperial legacy

¹³ For example, Benedict Anderson, interviewed by Alexander Semyonov in 2003, critically stated that empires were studied “like dinosaurs” – something that had become extinct (Semyonov & Glebov 2003).

in the present is now back in focus, and “far beyond the domain of purely historical research”. More recently, new interpretations of the historical empires have emerged, and suggestions have surfaced about interpreting contemporary political entities through the lens of an empire. Turoma and Waldstein have linked the “new imperial history” to the growing interest in spatial history, noting that the “spatial turn” in the social sciences and humanities after the end of the Cold War has influenced Russian studies as well (Turoma & Waldstein 2013, 14–15). A particular feature of these “new histories” is that the view of empire as a backward, rural and suppressive entity has been challenged with more nuanced interpretations of the nature of the imperial context for nation building. Aleksei Miller (2008, 212) advises contemporary historians to acknowledge the Russian empire’s successes instead of holding onto the “prison of nations” metaphor. According to Miller, it is crucial to note that the empire did not always suppress nation-building processes but also consciously facilitated them. Philipp Ther (2014, 574) criticises what he calls “the standard reading of twentieth century historiography” whereby national movements endured long struggles against empires, eventually achieving independence and the creation of a nation-state.

Igor Torbakov (2018, 19–20) divides the recent approaches to empire into objective ones emphasising structural relationships of political dominance, and subjective ones analysing empire as a system of attitudes and perceptions. Alongside these schools, he suggests focusing on concrete practices, namely what the leaders of empires do. I would interpret political language as constituting a part of those concrete practices, and hence analysing “imperial” through conceptual choices, combined with actual policies, is worthwhile. The annexation of Crimea can be interpreted from the perspective of expansionist imperialism, but the nature of the new “imperial body” is difficult to determine. Could the annexation, theoretically, also be seen as broadening the borders of the nation-state? Regardless of the interpretation, it is clear that the annexation of Crimea changed the meanings of the key concepts of Russianness, both referring to the nation and the state, and will influence the interpretations of these long hereafter. In this sense, while I have not applied “imperial” as an analytical concept, I would regard this dissertation, particularly publications II and IV, as contributing in part to the debate.

3.2 CIVILISATIONAL NATIONALISM AS A “THIRD WAY”

Emil Pain (2016, 47) explains that even though the Western academic tradition treats nation and empire as “extreme opposites”, in Russia the nation was long construed “along entirely different lines”. To grasp these lines, yet another concept has been proposed: “state-civilisation”. In analytical terms, the concept may represent the option to forego the theories of nation-state and empire alike: instead, the civilisational interpretation emphasises “both the

importance of national identity (the primacy of Russian culture) and tolerance toward other (non-Russian) cultures” (Torbakov 2018, 25–26). The concept has been popular within Russian academia since the early 1990s, emphasising Russia as one of the historical civilisations of the world. The Russian tradition merges with Samuel Huntington’s idea of civilisations as the main units of the world, the borders of which are defined by the main religions. In this way, the interpretation highlights the role of Russian Orthodoxy in the “thousand-year-long” history of the country.

Deconstructing the term “civilisational” in these accounts shows its close connection to the (neo-)Eurasianist school of thought. Eurasianism as a philosophy rejects the view of Russia as a periphery in relation to Europe, and instead portrays the location of the country as grounds for a “third way”. As Laruelle (2008, 12) explains, the significance of Eurasianism in contemporary Russia is based on the theoretical presuppositions of its doctrine that today’s conflicts are not economic or social in nature, but stem from “a clash between the cultural essences of peoples”. In a similar vein, the Eurasian doctrine portrays religions as a(n) (unchanging) foundation of a civilisation and suggests that civilisations are the true driving force of history. These views underline the authoritarian role of the state in preserving civilisation, but also validate the incompatibility of Russian and Western value systems as something inherently and naturally existing in the world.

Vera Tolz (1998, 994) depicted how the pre-revolutionary Russian émigré and Soviet concepts of nation and nationalism were applied in the intellectual debates on the nature of the Russian nation in the 1990s. She noted that the writings of “the Slavophiles of the 1840s, late 19th century Pan-Slavist Nikolai Danilevsky and historian Vasilii Klyuchevsky, early 20th-century philosophers Nikolai Berdyaev, Georgii Fedotov, Ivan Ilin and Vladimir Solovyov, as well as the Eurasianists – members of the émigré intellectual movement of the 1920s and 1930s” were perceived, sometimes in an uncritical manner, as “teachers” in search of spiritual and ideological inspiration. Indeed, many of the pre-revolutionary conservative-nationalist and Eurasian philosophers still serve as inspiration for currents that, by the 2010s, had gained more influence in the discourses of the nation. In this sense, the concept of civilisation illuminates the multilayered influence between academic research and other intellectual debates within society.

Kåre Johan Mjør and Sanna Turoma (2020) note that the idea of Russian civilisation that was initially formulated “in scholarly and pseudo-scholarly writings” has, by now, penetrated mainstream political discourse. Similarly, Alexander Verkhovsky and Emil Pain (2012, 56) write that the support for “civilisational nationalism” has become more visible since the early 2000s. In their view, the concept stresses Russia’s “special path” as antidemocratic: it utilises the idea of a special Russian civilisation in explaining why full-fledged democratic development cannot take place in Russia. Emil Pain has also

previously (2009, 75–76) described that the extreme imperial nationalists in Russia apply a certain kind of primordial discourse, regarding the state system as predetermined. The representatives of these strands have been portrayed as an intellectual source for the current regime (Barbashin & Thoburn 2014; Clover 2016). Indeed, according to Maria Engström:

Putin's so-called 'conservative turn' is in full accord with the political doctrine developed in numerous right-wing intellectual circles and think tanks, which identify themselves as neoconservative. This doctrine maintains that a state without ideology cannot be considered sovereign. (Engström 2014, 356)

This kind of “ideologisation” of politics was attractive to the Kremlin not only because it provided a means of legitimising its domestic power, but also because it had such deep roots in the Russian (both pre-revolutionary and Soviet) culture (ibid., 376.) However, the Kremlin did not adopt the Eurasianists’ neoconservative views as such. As Anton Shekhovtsov (2014) has pointed out, their political aims differ: “Putin’s project is authoritarian and restorationist, while that of [Aleksandr] Dugin is fascist and revolutionary.”

Yet the connection does not imply a causal relationship. Clearly, the Kremlin has been inspired by the neo-Eurasianist philosophy and has followed it closely, but this does not mean that those circles would have or would have had a direct impact on policy decisions. In 2014 in particular, it was tempting to interpret the Eurasianist influence on the Kremlin’s line of action as significant, but the “Eurasianist choice” has not proved to be particularly successful in mainstream society or among the political elites (Laruelle 2016b, 280-282). Perhaps the Eurasianist and civilisational discourses vis-à-vis state nationalism would be best understood in the context of the Kremlin’s “ideational improvisation”, as formulated by Henry Hale, Maria Lipman and Nikolai Petrov (2019, 182): The “founding fathers” of post-Soviet conservatism did have a role in enhancing the Crimean consensus in the media and in society, but this role was recalibrated in mid-2015 in order not to risk losing control over them (Hale et al. 2019, 190). However, the significance of this movement may lie elsewhere: Anton Shekhovtsov’s (2018) research on radical Russian nationalists’ extensive connections to Western actors functions as a reminder that the phenomenon is truly transnational in nature.

Clearly, the analytical concept of “imperial nationalism” has illuminated aspects that other concepts fail to grasp. However, labelling “imperial” or “civilisational” nationalism as Russia’s new ideology, as some scholars (Ponarin & Komin 2018a, 65; Verkhovsky & Pain 2012, 56) have done, raises several questions. First, the domestic aspect of imperial nationalism remains unclear, if we accept that an empire aims at governing different peoples differently. Can the federal structure be interpreted as an imperial model? Is

the imperial nationalism scheme actually adequate for circumventing the ethnic-civic dichotomy when analysing the domestic nation-building aspects? In the legislative sphere, the state authorities have applied classical civic language of equal citizens while construing practices that follow an assimilative course. The discourses stressing Russia's global role as a distinctive civilisation that protects and defends certain conservative values do have an "imperial" tone, but to what extent can this language be interpreted as an embodiment of imperial nationalism, and to what extent is it a foreign policy strategy, aimed at gaining greater international status?

Finally, it is perhaps worth asking whether the analytical uses of "imperial" or "civilisational" help to contextualise Russian nationalism in space and time, or whether these concepts are used instead to stress the "uniqueness" of Russia as an empirical case. In their introduction, Mjør and Turoma (2020) address this concern by stating that the interest in the concept of civilisation "should not be seen [...] as a methodological choice to highlight the country's *Sonderweg*", but should be placed in a wider, global context. An example of a fruitful transnational comparison could be one between the various forms of "imperial nationalism" in contemporary Russia and Turkey, something that Torbakov (2018, 147) has introduced in his book chapter comparing neo-Eurasianism in Russia and post-Kemalist neo-Ottomanism in Turkey.

To conclude, scholars have explained the nature of contemporary nationalism in Russia by using epithets like ethnic, imperial or civilisational. All of these concepts have been applied to the political reality in Russia, particularly after what Maria Engström (2014, 356) has dubbed "the re-ideologisation of Russian domestic, foreign and security policy", which depicts them as closely interlinked although they address different angles of the phenomenon. This dissertation aims to advance a view that with such a contested, context-bound and powerful concept as nationalism, a consensus over its meanings or a clear definition should not be expected in public discourses or in academic writing. Instead, focusing on the evolving uses of the concept in a specific context may prove helpful.

4 RESEARCH MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

When discussing methodology, many historians return to the idea of critically evaluating the source material to begin with: In what circumstances has the material been produced, by whom, and why – and how do these factors influence the usefulness of the text as a source? While these questions are still relevant for anyone working with textual material as a source, it is worth noting that the traditional view of source criticism within history research has developed into a view that stresses the usefulness of the source over its “reliability”. The usefulness of the source, then, arises from its ability to answer the research question that the scholar poses – and therefore, it is the researcher who ultimately decides which sources may or may not be fruitful for their work (Kalela 2012, 31–32). Moreover, Jorma Kalela suggests that the present mainstream thinking among historians is that all sources are tendentious, which does not imply discarding them as “unreliable”, but rather underlines the responsibility of the researcher to reveal those characteristics. This methodological approach acknowledges research as a subjective process, while still aiming to create the analytical distance needed between the material and the researcher (*ibid.*, 31).

The material for this dissertation consists of selected sets of written (or spoken and recorded) texts. From the point of view of the main research question in each publication, the texts need to be relevant, representative and meaningful. But, at the same time, they are understood as evidence of past events. In traditional history research, a very limited amount of text, possibly alongside material objects, may sometimes be all that the researcher has to build their interpretation upon. When studying contemporary subjects, the amount of potential material is enormous, and the methodological challenges arise not from scarcity but from representativeness. Yet the process of determining the sources also helps in organising the research questions in a more specific manner, which is an important part of the process. Finding, selecting, and reading the potential research material helps in further defining the parameters of the research itself. The material needs, by nature, to be limited, and the process of defining these limits encourages the researcher to ponder more consciously what it is that she is trying to find; in this way, choosing the material also directs the research questions, proving that it is not only the converse that applies.

4.1 MEDIA TEXTS AND THE PRESIDENT'S SPEECH ACTS

In general, certain reservations apply when using media material as a source of research. Texts in the media are produced from a certain position, they are subject to limitations, and they may serve purposes not necessarily visible in the text itself, but depending on the context instead. When interpreting texts published in a certain media outlet, the intended audience needs to be considered. Moreover, political and economic circumstances affect the media environment. In the case of contemporary Russia, during the past two decades, media freedom indicators have shown “a steady decline” in freedom of expression, most visibly due to the increasing state control over the media (Wijermars & Lehtisaari 2020, 2–3). The internet remained relatively free for a long time, but legislative measures in the 2010s restricted publishing and distributing content online. Yet this does not mean that the media sources could not be consulted. Rather, it shows that the producers of media texts need to consider political and economic preconditions, which may result, for example, in self-censorship that remains impossible to detect in the published media products.

During the 2000s, Russia's media audiences were formed anew. For example, TV is now the main source of information only for the older generation, whereas younger Russians acquire their news and other media content from the internet (Wijermars & Lehtisaari 2020; Deloitte CIS Research Center 2020, 21). The ownership of TV channels is state-aligned, and therefore politically sensitive content is distributed online or in heavily encrypted messaging applications, such as Telegram. Partly for this reason, the material collected for publication I consisted primarily of online material such as webpage texts, blog entries and tweets produced by representatives of selected nationalist movements. The analysis focused on the language of various groups and actors, some of whom were radical in their views and oppositional in relation to the Russian state authorities. Connecting the nationalist argumentation and announced activities on these sites during a three-year timeframe to the news material published online enabled analysis of the “offline” activities of the same groups, such as meetings, demonstrations, arrests, and court proceedings, which then helped in mapping the state authorities' control over these groups and individuals.

When collecting the material for publication II, online and social media content was omitted. The material in that publication consists of print media instead, collected through Integrum, a commercial collection of Russian-language full-text databases. The aim of the study was to analyse self-descriptive uses of the word “nationalist”, which would no doubt have been numerous in the social media sphere. However, studying the self-descriptive cases of “nationalist” in social media would have addressed a different issue:

in the online communities of radical nationalists, the actors would most likely have used different language. The term “nationalist” has negative connotations and carries a social stigma, which also explains the understanding of nationalism in those texts. In addition to the discussions within homogeneous groups, typical social media language would involve comments intended for a like-minded audience, or clear provocations, which is why I presume that social media sources do not depict public speech as a part of social reality in the same way that traditional media does, and hence for the purposes of publication II the narrow material collected from the latter was more functional. In the traditional press, the actors may weigh their message – consciously or unconsciously – according to the expected, wider audience. Moreover, “online media” as such in databases like Integrum comprises a wide category, including various outlets that do not necessarily follow any professional guidelines that the traditional media, despite various political and economic constraints, still does for the most part. This is what is referred to in the publication as the “filtering” function of editorial work.

Selecting the material for a study is a crucial step that sometimes extends throughout the whole research process. In each of the publications, the selection has been justified in slightly different ways to produce a representative collection of texts regarding the research question. In publication II, the material was collected from Integrum database by “hand-picking” self-descriptive uses of the word “nationalist”. The search queries were targeted at a large set of central and local newspapers, duly producing an original collection of texts purely for the purposes of this publication. Regarding publication I, a similar process was carried out: certain actors and groups in the nationalist field were detected, and their online and “offline” activities (through media representation) were followed over a certain period of time. Publications III and IV analyse keynote speeches delivered by the Russian president, combined with the context provided in federal-level policy documents, all of which have been made available on the Kremlin’s website, both in the original Russian and translated into English.¹⁴ In these cases, the selection entailed choosing the most relevant speeches. In publication III, only the annually recurring presidential address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation was analysed because of its special status in formulating state policies, although the twenty-year timeframe resulted in a significant amount of text nevertheless. For the purposes of publication IV, a different set of speeches was compiled in addition to the address to the Federal Assembly – the speeches on Victory Day, on the day of the annexation of Crimea, Valdai Forum speeches (and their Q&A sessions), as well as the greetings on the Day of National Unity were all analysed between the years 2012 and 2019. Here,

¹⁴ It should be noted that the speeches are, therefore, analysed in a mediated form: they may have been slightly altered from the version that the President delivered on the live occasion.

the aim was to ensure a diverse but concise collection, with 35 speeches scrutinised overall. It can be argued that the different audiences on these specific occasions affect the way in which the presidential message is delivered. However, an analysis of these individual, context-bound texts revealed certain consistencies within the source material as a whole. In this sense, the added value of publication IV was to present key narratives reoccurring in the presidential discourse throughout the time period studied.

Clearly, presidential speech does not represent the official political language alone. In addition, many actors in Russian politics and the media contribute to the creation and maintenance of the official nationalist discourses, and as Astrid S. Tuminez (2000, 3) points out, intellectuals and other proponents of nationalist ideas are significant because the ruling elite may become interested in their message, especially if they attract a significant number of followers within society. In the shift in foreign policy discourses in 2013–14, the state leadership seemed to take advantage of the narratives of previously marginalised groups in justifying Russia's actions in Ukraine. These discourses have been described, for instance, as *revanchist* and *messianic* (Barbashin 2017, 111; Engström 2014; see also subchapters 3.1 and 3.2). The foreign policy discourses have become more unified since 2012, and especially since 2014. There is some disagreement among the Russian political elite on some other topics, such as the national economy (see e.g. Rutland 2016), but as a general rule, it can be said that in Russian politics today the presidential discourse reflects the predominant views on decisive matters. The president's endorsement of any political idea, in the programmatic, prepared addresses in particular, carries specific weight. Thus, the president's speech is, to all intents and purposes, an act.

According to constructivist research approaches, language frames the social reality. Moreover, linguistic choices define the sphere of possible politics. A crosscutting theme of this dissertation is the ability of language to form practices: for example, dominant discourses framing “us” differently from “them” in fundamental terms enable and justify corresponding, divisive policy decisions. When it comes to presidential speeches in contemporary Russia, the linguistic actions can have very direct implications. In June 2014, the president's annual address to the Federal Assembly was categorised as a strategic planning document for steering Russia's politics (kremlin.ru 2014a, chapter 3, article 11). The linkage between the president's rhetoric and his ability to exercise power became particularly evident in January 2020 when he suggested amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation in his speech to the Federal Assembly. Less than two months later, these amendments, together with additional ones suggested by a specific working group whose members were approved by the president, had been accepted both in the state Duma proceedings and by the constitutional court. A (legally non-binding) referendum, or “All-Russian vote”, was organised at the end of

June and the beginning of July, and on July 4, the new Constitution came into force (Gosudarstvennaya дума 2020). The whole process from the president's first pronouncement concerning the amendments to their entry into force took less than seven months.

In the 2010s at least, it became commonplace to refer to the Russian political system as an established authoritarian one, and to refrain from regarding it as a “hybrid” model combining democratic institutions and authoritarian rule. In addition, the current political system in Russia is heavily president-centred both according to the legislation and in practical terms. Therefore, between 2000 and 2020, the president came to embody the highest political power in Russia. This is not to say, however, that his power would be unlimited. While the political system is formally tied to the extensive presidential powers, in practice there are many structural weaknesses that limit the president's power (Burkhardt 2021, 473–474; Frye 2021). Throughout the 2000s, the “strong state system” (Tsygankov 2014) has undergone phases of re-defining and re-distributing state power, with the result that certain tasks, especially in foreign politics, are delivered by third-party actors who have become “state actors” without a strict connection to formal institutions of power (see e.g. Galeotti 2017, 2–6). Moreover, Russian state power is built not so much on formal institutions but, as Alena Ledeneva argues (2013, 17), on the system of informal networks that both sustain and constrain presidential power.

Yet another important clarification regarding presidential power may be in order. When I chose to study presidential discourse in two of the publications, the decision was not motivated by Vladimir Putin's – or Dmitri Medvedev's – personality, but rather by their persona as a political leader. I do not assume that Putin's personality could be revealed by reading the texts that his administration has produced, nor by analysing the statements he himself has made on different occasions, and this is not even of interest in my study. Rather, these texts and statements are evidence of the “thinking” within the state system, as voiced by the president. The distinction is relevant when considering the trend of the strong personification of political power in the political sciences (Burkhardt 2021, 473).

Newspaper texts, internet media, political speeches and policy documents all follow different linguistic conventions. In the publications comprising this dissertation, the focus has been on nationalist language as a political practice. The guiding principle of the content analysis from the perspective of conceptual history has been to interpret changes in specific concepts, reoccurring expressions, and their contexts over time. In the following, I will discuss the method in practice as well as its potential limitations. Publication III conducts an analysis of metaphors in political rhetoric, while publication IV maps narratives on the Russian nation produced in the presidential discourse. Both publications are based on political speeches, mainly Russian

President Vladimir Putin's keynote speeches (III) combined with the context provided in federal-level policy documents (IV).

4.2 RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CONCEPTUAL CHANGE

Any text-based research is confronted by an important question: How can a consistent method of interpretation be created and maintained throughout the process of analysing the material? In this dissertation, as has been described above, the textual material represents political language for the most part, produced by those exercising state power or those challenging its views. The texts have provided insights into the views and thoughts of the actors about the nation, but in order to produce a coherent analysis, a more specific understanding of political language was needed. To this end, I have turned to the theorisations of conceptual history as a general approach to political language when shaping my method of interpretation.

Quentin Skinner, building upon the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein and John L. Austin, argued that in order to understand any serious utterance, “we need to grasp something *over and above* the sense and reference of the terms used to express it” (Skinner 2002, 103–104, italics added). As Kari Palonen (1999, 43) has explained, Skinner's perspective on conceptual change is primarily linguistic, or rhetorical. This view is rather fundamental in his reply to critique in 1988, where Skinner stated that “there can be no histories of concepts as such; there can only be histories of their uses in argument” (cited in *ibid.*, 46). Thus, adopting a rhetorical view of conceptual history means that the interest lies in the way in which concepts are used, and what is *done* when they are used. Yet, following Skinner's logic that interpretation goes beyond the text itself, I have aimed at a careful contextualisation of the research material in each of the publications. The spatial, temporal and political context of the text also helps in discussing the intentions and objectives of the actors, even though it is acknowledged that these cannot be “shown” by interpreting the text alone (and intentionality, in the way that Skinner explains it, has not been the main focus of any of the dissertation publications). Rather, the ambition has been to detect changes over time in the ways in which nationalist language is used within certain discourses.

In publications II–IV, discourse as a concept is used in a practical manner to refer to a certain kind of text or talk: for example, presidential discourse follows certain conventions and maintains a specific power position in society, whereas the media have a different logic for producing text, which depends on the type of outlet, expected audience and channel. In publication IV, I have also consulted some key policy documents that characteristically dispel the agent, producing an impersonal and seemingly unambiguous message.

Despite using the concept of discourse to describe various textual genres, I have not applied discourse analysis as a method. Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori (2018, 671–672) suggest that a common denominator of various styles of discourse analysis lies in “uncovering the features of text that maintain coherence in units larger than the sentence”. Discourse analysis in general, and critical discourse analysis in particular, stress the element of power – an eminent category in the research questions in this dissertation, too. The main interest of the publications has been in rhetorically oriented conceptual history. Following this line, all of the publications have a slightly different methodological emphasis, which I will summarise below.

The first publication, studying the changing policies of the Russian state authorities towards “the nationalist challenge” in the country, maps the territory of contemporary Russian nationalism(s) by depicting the “shared space” of state nationalism and the interpretations of the oppositional nationalist actors. The publication is based on a systematic reading of online material provided by radical nationalist actors themselves between the years 2011 and 2015. Some of the material was accessed through the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, a tool that enables access to websites that might no longer exist. When analysing this material, opinion polls as well as media sources were consulted to contextualize the online manifestations of the movements to “offline” events. In reading the material, the presented views, claims, and activities of the groups were categorized and then compared both to each other and to the state authorities’ reactions and measures towards the most well-known actors within those movements. In this way, the state response to “the nationalist challenge” could be presented, and analysed from the perspective of dissentful-consentful political contention.

In publication II, I analysed a textual collection of self-descriptive uses of the term “nationalist” in the media, drawing on Quentin Skinner’s typology of conceptual change. Skinner explains that change in the “meaning” of a certain concept is best approached by focusing on three aspects: the nature and range of the criteria according to which the word is usually applied (what does the word standardly refer to?); the nature and range of reference (in what circumstances is the word applied?), as well as the range of attitudes usually connected to the word (is the word perceived positively, negatively, or in neutral terms?). Following these aspects over time provides more systematic information on conceptual change than merely focusing on change in the meaning of a certain word (Skinner 2002, 160–162; see also Palonen 1999, 46–47). These three aspects guided the analysis in publication II, where the speakers aimed to explain the attitudes related to “nationalist” as either neutral or positive, and broadened both the range of criteria and the range of reference in using the concept.

In the last two publications, I chose to employ qualitative content analysis to study the nationalist argumentation of the state leadership. In this material,

the aspect of power in nationalist argumentation was implicitly present as the president's speeches represent and express state power, and could be interpreted as hegemonic discourse. More specifically, publication III drew on the study of metaphors, whereas publication IV analysed key narratives about the nation in the speeches. Publication III maps Russia's internal, external and historical "Others" in presidential keynote speeches during the years 2000–2020. In practice, the material was read in two phases: first, the parts where the national "us" was mirrored against "them" were detected, and any particular metaphors and concepts related to these were highlighted. For example, the metaphor of world order or international relations as *competition*, or the *strength* of the nation or state, reoccurred in the presidential discourse. After collecting these metaphors (or "meaning units" as they are sometimes referred to in coding qualitative material), they were analysed from a temporal perspective: Which implicative elements did the metaphors stress at different times, and how did they evolve over time? In this way, certain continuities could be distilled from the material, such as the enduring economic, political and even "moral" competition between Russia and its Others.

Publication IV benefitted from the study of political narratives by organising the state leadership's discourse on "Russianness" into three key narratives. In this case, too, the material was first scrutinised for references to the Russian nation (*russkii / rossiiskii narod / natsiya*), to "us" as a nation, or to "our" national character. Thereafter, the mentions were categorised thematically, in that the temporal and possible causal aspects of defining the nation were studied. For example, if a certain national characteristic was connected to a past event or chain of events, these were elaborated on. As a result of the analysis, three distinctive narratives could be presented that persist over time and that appear to be mutually reinforcing. These were not the only possible narratives about the nation during the period studied, but I would maintain that they capture the essence of the nationalist argumentation of the Russian state leadership in 2012–2019.

There are numerous ways to study conceptual change in practice, but for the purposes of these publications, selecting the relevant material has been crucial. The close reading phases that followed for each publication all highlighted different perspectives. Next, I will briefly return to two methodological approaches, namely analysing the implicative systems of certain metaphors and organising key concepts within certain narratives, and situating these in a temporal context.

Metaphors

This dissertation views the nation as being the result of a deliberate process of constructing. Moreover, in the publications that focus on political language, I

contend that “[n]ationalist ideologies strive to gain acceptance as ‘common sense’ in their chosen territory by operating a successful articulation of concepts” (Fairclough, cited in Sutherland 2005, 195). As has been described above, this process takes place in language, and often benefits from figurative language, conceptual innovations, or persistent, “naturalised” forms of expression. Elaborating on his theory of banal nationalism, Michael Billig stressed the everyday practices with which nationalism is produced and maintained in society. One of the “unnoticed” linguistic patterns, particularly common in political and media discourses, is the habit of describing the nation as “us”. The national stereotypes reinforced in this way stress both the temporal aspect of the nation, and its indivisibility: “we” have our own particular national history, and “we” form a unified entity in the world of many other similarly particular nations (Billig 1995, 70–73). The stereotyping force of the nation as “us” metaphor appears to a certain extent in all of the publications comprising this dissertation, and especially in publications III and IV, which focus on presidential speeches.

Speaking of a nation as “us” is a widespread, universal metaphor of political language. Some more specific metaphors of political language may, in a similar way, invoke a feeling of unity among the nation. For example, what “we” are like, or what “our” position is in the world are often described in figurative language. In the realm of international relations, one of the persistent metaphors is to portray states (or nations) as persons, as Paul Chilton and George Lakoff (1995, 39) have explained – and, unsurprisingly so, as “organisations of all kinds tend to be personified”, with states being among the most powerful political organisations. Portraying the state as a person enables translating common sense concepts such as the health and strength of a person into the virtues of a state, such as national wealth and military force (*ibid.*, 43). In a similar way, the nation can also be addressed with metaphors like family or house, but the “anthropomorphic” use, or the Nation-As-Person metaphor, seems particularly commonplace. All of these metaphors form strong rhetorical tools for justifying political aims as well as “naturalising” national frames of thinking.

Rieke Schäfer (2012, 29) has noted that the conceptual history approach could be fruitfully combined with metaphor theory, as figurative language often plays a significant role in conceptual change. She points out that the analytical focus on figurative language, such as metaphors, could help conceptual history overcome its “blind spots”: that of concepts being present even when the exact words would not be used; and that of new interpretations of conceptual relations. To do this, as she suggests, the uses of a certain metaphor could be historically contextualised, after which the “thought-guiding” force of that specific metaphor can be studied more effectively. In this way, the increasing or decreasing force of a metaphor helps in explaining conceptual change.

In Schäfer's study, a metaphor is understood as "an analogy in thought": a metaphorical utterance connects two concepts from different semantic systems, and thus creates meaning. Following Max Black, Schäfer refers to the non-conventionally used concept as *focus*, and the implicative complex of the metaphor as *frame*. If the metaphor is impossible to express equally in a literal paraphrase, it can be understood as a "strong" metaphor (ibid., 32). Publication III analyses the evolution of Russia's "Others" in the years 2000–2020 through, for example, the metaphor of international relations as a competition. In this case, competition is the focus, and international relations form the frame of the metaphor. Yet competition as a metaphor for international relations is no longer "non-conventional" in the sense that Schäfer depicts, as it has become a conventional way of perceiving world politics, but the concept has a strongly metaphorical connotation when it is used by political actors for positioning: they depict "Others" as being "ahead", and may reinforce the idea that only one actor may "win". In this case, competition is the focus, and international relations are the frame of the metaphor. The analysis shows how the Russian presidential addresses apply the metaphor in the early 2000s mainly as having an economic character: the competition between states in the world is a struggle over global markets and resources.

Narratives

Like metaphors, narratives are universal and commonplace ways to enrich political discourse on the one hand, and to reach a "commonsensical" hegemonic position, on the other. Shaul R. Shenhav (2006, 250) explains that the general public regard the narrative form as a natural way of thinking. As an analytical concept, a narrative has many layers depending on its field of application, be it literary theory, sociology or social science. As Anna De Fina (2017, 234) points out, there is no consensus among linguists "on the criteria that distinguish narratives from other discourse genres". A narrative does not equal a "story", even though the two concepts are often used interchangeably. Rather, a story should be reserved for a prototypical narrative whereas the narrative, then, would signify a genre that comprises different types of stories.

In defining what actually constitutes a narrative, the emphasis varies between causality, chronology and temporality as key categories. Edwin Bacon (2012, 768) states that "[w]hile scholars debate the relevance and rigour of narrative explanations, political actors employ them habitually in communicating with the public", and points out that "a good story" provides a powerful way of touching the populace, which is why political actors often rely on the narrative form in their parlance. Following these notions, I have mapped key narratives about the nation in the discourse of the Russian political leadership in 2012–2019, and have presented them in publication IV.

In this respect, a minimum definition of sorts was applied, namely that a narrative is understood as a socially produced account of events that contains aspects of temporality and causality (De Fina 2017, 234).

Jorma Kalela has pointed out that “history-making” is a social process, involving various actors within a society or a community that together produce “shared histories”. The groundwork for these understandings of the past is created “outside university rooms and libraries”; the shared histories are formed through popular representations, various stories, and folklore – scholars have only a very limited role in influencing the interpretations of the past that exist in society (Kalela 2012, 75). It is in this context of various shared histories that politicians and political leaders produce their narratives – and often aim to connect these to the widely held, existing perceptions. Bacon’s (2012) understanding of public political narratives as stories of the shared past told to the people in the present, usually to further certain political ends, can thus be situated as forming one part of Kalela’s conceptualisation of shared history. Following these lines of argumentation, the aim of publication IV has been to detect key events, causalities and continua of the past that the state leadership wishes to emphasise when reinforcing their nationalist argument.

Selective use of the past in political discourse is a common practice, but in choosing to focus on “narratives” instead of, for example, “topics”, I wish to stress how the president’s discourse draws on the long history of the nation and connects the development of the nation’s explicit character to previous phases of challenge, conflict and pride in its past. For example, in the presidential discourse after 2015, parallels between past generations and the nation in the present were drawn repeatedly: the president likened the Red Army metaphorically to the Russian military, operating in Syria at the time, or to the Victory Day commemorations in Red Square. In these processes, “narrating” the nation is seen as a means by which the state leadership can enhance national unity and produce boundaries of belonging in space and over time that, eventually, become “common sense”.

It is methodologically challenging, to say the least, to study whether the narratives produced by the state leadership are genuinely or intuitively embraced by the people, and hence that question remains to be examined elsewhere. In this sense, the actual “reception” of key narratives by the population falls beyond the scope of the publication. However, at the same time, the discourse of the political leadership *includes* the reception by the audience in its formation. The president’s speeches are socially produced, and the way in which the narratives of the nation are told reflects the views that the state power assumes that the general public holds.

Bacon suggests that by analysing public political narratives, some predictions about future trends could also be made, although I have not fully endorsed this view in the publication. I have, however, embraced his vision of “subplots”:

Subplots sit within the narrative; they are not alternative stories told by those opposed to the regime, but are told by the regime itself. [...] a successful public political narrative contains plot and subplot, providing the developmental flexibility essential to its usefulness and longevity. (Bacon 2012, 780)

For example, in the presidential discourse, multinationality as a historical feature of the Russian nation is frequently emphasised: “Russianness” is presented as inherently multi-ethnic, but ethnic Russians have a special – that is, more important – role within the national constellation. Therefore, the decisive role of ethnic Russians in the shared history of the nation functions as a subplot within the narrative of the multinational nation. The political force of this subplot increased after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 when distinctively ethnic vocabulary was applied concurrently with references to the multinationality of the Russian nation.

4.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE CHOSEN METHODOLOGY

In all of the research publications, the aim was to maintain a certain sensitivity towards detecting recurrent words and utterances in the textual material. The material chosen for each publication was concise enough to be processed manually, and hence no statistics were produced or meaning units quantitatively grouped. For this reason, I have not been able to show in concrete terms whether some expressions in the material became explicitly more or less frequent during the research period (which could have been done in publications III and IV, for example). However, in the reading phases of the material, I believe the context of any utterance has a critical significance in this sense; it is not only the frequency but also the ways in which certain concepts are used that matters when analysing conceptual change.

The amount of textual material in each publication is not extensive, which is why I was able to conduct the reading phases myself instead of relying on any digitally assisted method. Thus, the method could be described as a “close reading” of the texts instead of digitally assisted “distant reading”. The latter, intended to be used with large-scale textual material, such as corpora and other “big data”, may prove useful because “it allows us to see things that we don’t necessarily see when reading as humans” (Froehlich 2015). For instance, digital methodologies help in mapping patterns of grammatical use and in detecting statistically likely or unlikely phrases. In an ideal case, “close reading” could be complemented with “distant reading”, but software-assisted methods are not “ready-to-use”, and often do not suffice by themselves. Rather, they yield the best results when applied after a qualitative “close-reading” research phase (e.g. Indukaev 2021).

In the publications that make up this dissertation, the reading phases could also be described as “distant” and “close”, starting from the first reading to familiarise myself with the material and organise it in a preliminary way, and proceeding to the reading phases that categorise and analyse the texts in a more detailed manner. Therefore, the “manual” methodology of interpretation is no less rigorous, but approaches the texts differently. The publications in this dissertation each address an original research question, based on their source material, but several possibly fruitful topics for digitally assisted “distant reading” could be proposed based on their results.

As mentioned in publication II, the meanings and values attached to the concept of nationalism seem to be in flux in contemporary Russia. Between the years 2009 and 2015, the proportion of respondents who treated the term “nationalism” in a positive way increased considerably (Pipiya 2015). One way to map the attitudes linked to the concept in the Russian language would be to make a big data collection and then search for linguistic patterns that surround the concept, for example with topic modelling tools. (Some of these could be used, for instance, to ascertain which words appear in texts most often alongside each other by listing, for example, five words that appear before and after the key concept in the text, and then showing the most common ones.) In other words, mapping the words that appeared in texts along with the concept of nationalism most often during the past decade could produce interesting results on conceptual change and help in analysing whether the immediate linguistic contexts in which the concept is most often applied have changed. Ideally, this could aid understanding of why the attitudes towards nationalism as a concept have eased over time. Could the change in contexts, for example, indicate movement away from ethnic, xenophobic or even racist connotations – and perhaps towards contexts linked more directly to state nationalism, national pride, or patriotism?

During the review process for some of the publications, the “manual” method of coding was discussed, which I would interpret as signalling an increasing interest and confidence in computer-assisted corpus analysis, and perhaps digital methodologies in social science research in general. However, the software used for qualitative analysis functions along the same lines as the “manual” process of interpretation: the researcher determines the categories that they wish to identify in the material, selects the meaningful coding units, and interprets the results. Consequently, using digital methods does not solve the problem of subjectivity. In order to draw plausible conclusions, the researcher needs to be familiar with the logic of processing the data in any case. Therefore, I do not see the lack of digitally assisted methodologies as a problem in this dissertation, even though I do recognize the possible benefits they could have provided.

Another, perhaps more significant point of consideration is that I have conducted the whole analysis on my own. Often in qualitative research, it is

regarded as an asset if more than one researcher is involved in coding the material because this is thought to ensure that several possible readings are covered in the process (e.g. Schreier 2012, 19). There are certainly benefits in sharing the responsibility with another researcher, discussing the material, and posing further questions for each other. While not being able to benefit from discussing the interpretations I have drawn with someone else, I can now be relatively certain that my analytical methods have remained consistent throughout the process. This is not to say that subjectivity can be avoided. On the contrary, I believe that acknowledging that a researcher's interpretation is always subjective should be seen as a starting point for the analysis and not as a hindrance to it.

5 HISTORICAL ELEMENTS OF THE NATIONALIST ARGUMENT

When situating the fluctuations of the nationalist discourses in Russia in a temporal context, certain continuities and changes in Russian and Soviet history begin to take shape. Political language is always layered, and the contents of the nationalist argument in the present are built upon its previous understandings in space and time. In this chapter, I will consider those historical elements of the nationalist argument that appeared significant when working with the material collected for the publications. In this sense, the approach is inevitably selective, focusing on aspects of the *longue durée* of Russian history that seem particularly crucial in understanding the nationalist argumentation today.

Nationalism, in general, is a phenomenon that utilizes representations of the past. The explicit character of any nation vis-à-vis other nations is best explained with its distinctive history. In this dissertation, the significance of the “shared past” is revealed at several levels: first, the past events *in themselves* are important as they have created the circumstances we live in today. In addition to the actual events, the languages of the past have an influence on the languages of the present. Second, the *use* (and abuse) of the past plays an increasingly important role in public speech and politics in the contemporary world. The ways to frame, highlight and connect past events to each other indicate the values and thinking in the present.

Third, not only certain events in the past but the *perception of history itself* is embedded in the nationalist argument. In this deeper, essentialist understanding of the nature of history, the nationalist argument makes the case that the nation realises a historical “mission” in the world. The state authorities, for example, produce language that positions the Russian state (and the Russian nation) above the various chains of historical events: it is in the *nature* of the state (and nation) that it prevails throughout the centuries. Michael Freeden (2005, 220) depicts the view of historical time as “organic” and accumulative, as being primarily a feature of those nationalist morphologies that exist and develop within conservative host ideologies.

Politicians often use rhetoric that seeks validation from history, and Russia is no exception in this sense. Particularly in the 2010s, the political leadership invested significant material and symbolic resources in promoting its version of the national past. In her analysis of the political uses of the Great Patriotic War, Olga Malinova (2017, 46–47) conceptualises the official politics of history with the term “usable past”. In present-day Russia, the state has taken

the leading role in constructing the official narratives of the national history, and the ruling elite also sees this as their political responsibility.

In the 2000s and 2010s in particular, the importance of a “usable past” has been reflected in several projects of the state authorities, aimed at “guarding” the correct interpretations of the past: patriotic education programmes employ certain narratives of the national past, projects to unify history education in schools have taken place since around 2009, patriotic historical tourism is enhanced across the country, and Victory Day celebrations have become increasingly important for the state in the 2010s.¹⁵ Expressing “disrespectful” views about the national history has become criminalized, as the “rehabilitation of Nazism” was included in the 2014 set of new media and extremism legislation (the so-called Yarovaya law package).¹⁶ In the context of repressive measures of an authoritarian state, it is perhaps worth noting that this legislation is not merely a deterrent but has been applied in practice (see e.g. Strugov 2016). Moreover, the constitutional amendments that came into force in July 2020 state that the Russian Federation, “united by the thousand-year history”, protects the historical truth. The new constitution also notes that downplaying the significance of “the heroic deed of the people in defending the Fatherland” is not allowed (Gosudarstvennaya дума 2020, chapter 3, article 67.1, parts 2–3).

In the official discourse, the post-Soviet narrative of Russian history as “thousand-year-long” is affirmed by referring to earlier history. These cases underline how Russia’s agency and mission prevail over the course of history: the nation and the state are portrayed as existing in the world for centuries, and duly remaining above and beyond the events that take place. For example, in 2005, the Day of National Unity was introduced as a new public holiday, taking the historical context from the Muscovite resistance against the Polish-Lithuanian invasion in 1612 (see more on this in publication III). In the context of the Crimean annexation, Vladimir Putin highlighted Prince Vladimir’s Christian baptism, which took place on the peninsula in the year 988 (kremlin.ru 2014b). The symbolic might of the event – and the Kyivan Rus’ history as a whole – for contemporary Russia was further stressed in 2016 when a statue to the same Prince Vladimir was unveiled outside the Kremlin in the heart of Moscow (Plokhyy 2017, vii–viii). Publication IV argues that the parallels between past and present conflicts have been asserted in the

¹⁵ As recent examples of state-backed history projects, military “amusement parks”, called Park Patriot, and new history museums called Russia – My History could be mentioned (Kurilla et al. 2018). Ekaterina Klimenko (2020) points out that the latter initiative was originally developed within the Russian Orthodox Church and serves to portray the “official” vision of Russian history.

¹⁶ In November 2020, Deputy Chair of the State Duma, Irina Yarovaya, suggested expanding the current legislation to criminalise spreading false information about the Soviet history (*Kommersant* 2020).

presidential discourse in recent years. The rhetorical choices highlight Russians living today as a link in the long chain of generations of the victorious nation, stressing the moral aspect of the conflicts in the present and the responsibility of today's Russians to remember and respect their past.

Clearly, interpretations of the national past have become crucial for the state leadership in enhancing national pride and securing national unity within the country, but the way historical elements are understood also influences Russian foreign policy discourse. Most evidently, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was and continues to be portrayed as correcting a mistake of the past (kremlin.ru 2014b; see also Teper 2016, 383–384). In June 2020, President Vladimir Putin published an essay depicting his vision of world history. Repeating his view that history is under threat of falsification, Putin concluded by stressing the role of the five great powers in managing the contemporary challenges:

There can be no doubt that the summit of Russia, China, France, the United States, and the UK will play an important role in finding common answers to modern challenges and threats, and will demonstrate a common commitment to the spirit of alliance, to those high humanist ideals and values for which our fathers and grandfathers fought shoulder to shoulder. (Putin 2020, 44)

In Putin's foreign policy vision, the great powers should take the lead in uncertain times, just as they did in Tehran, Yalta, San Francisco and Potsdam in 1943–1945, and agree upon future world policy developments among themselves. The text positions Russia among the leading powers in the world, which reflects the analysis presented in publication III: Russia's strengths in the present-day international competition are portrayed as its moral and military might. The emphasis on the outcome of the Second World War – and the Soviet Union's indisputably decisive role in that outcome – serves a political goal in Putin's representation, and the essay to defend an "objective" understanding of history needs to be read primarily as an act of foreign policy.

Among the Russian people, history has been a significant source of national pride in recent decades. Marharyta Fabrykant and Vladimir Magun (2019, 33) show that the Russians' overall national pride grew substantially in 1996–2015, and particularly rapidly between the years 2012 and 2014. Growth in national pride has been selective, but the data shows that pride in history has remained relatively high throughout the study period.

With the state authorities' increasing eagerness to "guard" the interpretations of the national past, there is no room for critical public discussion on these topics in society. Serious scholarly debates on history are confined to small academic circles. Yet this is not to say that the official

discourse of the national past would always be embraced by the general (educated) public.

In the following, I map the historical elements of the nationalist argumentation by showing, on the one hand, how the past becomes manifested in the present-day actors' language and, on the other hand, which events, shifts or figures in history I as a researcher interpret as crucial in shaping the course of nationalism in Russia.

5.1 THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE: NATIONALISM “EMERGING”

Historical writing often organises the past into periods, defining the beginning, phases, and ending of certain phenomena. The same applies to nationalism in Russia. The “birth” of nationalism is impossible to detect, but a comparative view of scholars' interpretations is nevertheless illuminating: depicting the periods in which nationalism has evolved in Russia also reveals the various contexts of nationalism. Emil Pain, for example, begins his account of nationalism from the “long nineteenth century”, from 1790 until 1917. In the first phase of that period, from around 1790 until 1833, the idea of “nation” emerged in the context of “popular sovereignty, political representation and constitutional order” – mostly propagated by the Decembrists, demanding reforms of the tsarist autocracy. In these interpretations of history, nationalism “begins” when the idea of the nation as a political subject emerges in the context of its relationship to the state. From this point of view, Decembrists are sometimes depicted as Russia's “first representatives of nationalist ideology” (Pain 2018, 23–24). However, nationalism is often understood as really taking root in Russia only in the debates that followed the crushing of the Decembrist revolt in 1825: namely, the conservative response of Nicholas I's government.

As mentioned in subchapter 2.2, the “official nationality”¹⁷ doctrine rested upon the triad of “orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality”, formulated by Minister of Education Sergei Uvarov in 1832. The true conceptual innovation was embedded in “nationality”, meaning Russian people's traditional and organic devotion to the first two core ideas. Alexei Miller (2014, 321) explains that the word *narodnost'* “was now used to create a cognitive gap with the concept of Nation – which was inseparably linked to the idea of political representation – and constitution”. With this move, the regime portrayed constitutionalism per se as unsuitable for Russia.

¹⁷ The policy sometimes appears in scholarly work under the name “official nationalism”.

The Decembrists, the officials of the Russian army who had familiarised themselves with liberal Western thought during the Napoleonic Wars, posed a domestic challenge to the Nicholas I regime, but at the same time, the developments within and around the Russian empire – the 1830–31 revolutions in Europe as well as the November Uprising in Poland – required new approaches from the government. As Serhii Plokhy (2017, 72) puts it, it was indeed the “failure to resolve the Polish question by the traditional expedient of assimilating the elites of the conquered territories” that made the Russian political elite re-examine its own identity in the 1830s. Alexander Yanov (1987, 30; see also the Appendix) has outlined Russian and Soviet history as a cycle of reformist attempts and counter-reformist responses following each other, where Nicholas I’s reign from 1825 to 1855 should be read as one of the counter-reformist dictatorships. Yanov described the mechanism of official nationality as “craftily constructed”:

The trio of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality artfully interwove despotism with religion, reaction with patriotism, and serfdom with a sense of nationality. In rising up against despotism, one risked striking a blow against patriotism, and in rising up against reaction, one risked challenging religion. It was a resourceful construct, an ideological trap of enormous potency. (Yanov 1987, 31)

It was in these circumstances that the early Slavophiles began to develop their views on the “Russian idea”, strongly influenced by German Romanticism. In Yanov’s (1987, 31) interpretation, the Slavophiles aimed at the secularisation of power by challenging the official nationality doctrine, but as Susanna Rabow-Edling (2006, 17) notes, anti-imperialism by no means dominated the ideas of the nationalists at the time. She argues that the emergence of Slavophile thought resulted from the Russian educated elite’s multifaceted crisis of identity. The educated elite’s hopes for reform were shattered after the Decembrist revolt, and as Nicholas I reacted to the challenge by excluding the gentry from participation in government, the country’s cultural elite became even more separated from official society. The key discrepancy was that the “educated society” was westernized, while their country was not” (ibid., 27) and the emphasis on the Russian people and distinctive culture arose from this notion (ibid., 25–27; 135). Even though the early Slavophiles failed to change the political reality of the empire, their ideas were adopted and further developed by representatives of subsequent ideological currents.

After the death of Nicholas I, the debates between the Slavophiles and “Westerners” (*zapadniki*, from the Russian word *Zapad*, West) intensified, and especially from the 1880s onwards, both currents grew more radical in their views (Rabow-Edling 2006, 137–138). Russia’s relationship to Europe remained at the heart of their disagreement. While the early Slavophiles

sought ways to overcome the idea of “imitating” the West with their original, distinctive Russian culture, the later developers of the philosophy portrayed the Russian national character more directly as opposing the “Western” one, providing intellectual grounds for future forms of Russian nationalism.¹⁸

Marlene Laruelle (2016b) notes that in everyday parlance, the idea of the West often overlaps with Europe, but acknowledging the distance between those concepts aids understanding of Russian identity debates. Even the late nineteenth-century Slavophiles perceived Russia as a part of Europe, but they saw the Western model of Enlightenment as having taken the wrong direction. The Enlightenment based on Western rationalism lacked the connection to the moral condition of man, whereas the Russian alternative (in Slavophile terms, *prosveshchenie*) would have “both a spiritual and national character” (Rabow-Edling 2006, 87). The true, pure Christianity was preserved within the Russian Orthodox Church – a discourse that coincides with the idea of Russia representing “the third Rome” after the fall of Byzantium.¹⁹ Indeed, the dichotomy between the spiritual Russia and the rationalist (or materialist) West has served various functions in Russian intellectual history.

At the end of the 19th century, certain representatives of the artistic, non-conformist and Orientalist intellectual circles, and more explicitly their successors within the Eurasian movement in the interwar period, argued that Russia actually forms its own civilisation, not belonging to either Europe or Asia. Marlene Laruelle suggests that since these ideological currents emerged, Russia’s place in the world has been debated in trinary, not binary terms:

In the Russian view, there is a triple choice of identity: being a European country that follows the Western path of development; being a European country that follows a non-Western path of development; or being a non-European country. (Laruelle 2016b, 278)

Laruelle (2016b, 279) further argues that in the wake of the conservative turn in the 2000s, the Kremlin chose to pursue an “anti-Western European civilisation” narrative – an “almost-perfect reproduction of the nineteenth-century debate in today’s terms”. The late Slavophiles’ juxtaposition between the West and Russia and their ideas on Russia’s “special path” of development have been revisited implicitly and explicitly in the post-Soviet political discourse. For example, as publication III notes, in Vladimir Putin’s parlance concerning Russia’s Others after the mid-2000s, the West continues to be portrayed as exemplary, but Russia must strive for modernisation by following

¹⁸ Emil Pain (2018, 26) summarises the late Slavophiles’ view of the Russian national character as “patient, spontaneous, warm, generous and inclined to *sobornost’* (a preference for collectivism)”, mirrored against a generic view of the Western mentality as “self-interested, greedy, deceitful and coldly calculating”.

¹⁹ On the myth and its post-Soviet application, see Østbø 2016.

its own path. In this way, ideas originally shaped by the early Slavophiles and the architects of the official nationality policy have been revisited in the present, particularly in order to rhetorically reinforce the continuum of Russia's distinctiveness vis-à-vis the West.

The official nationality policy and the emergence of Slavophile thought in the 1830s marked one possible "beginning" of the history of nationalism in Russia. Analysing the development of state nationalism in the pre-revolutionary Russian and Soviet empires, periodisation can also be arranged in terms of the relations between national minorities and the state. Theodore R. Weeks (2013, 200) maps "separatist nationalism" in Russia along these lines, noting, however, that "in the Russian Empire, religion was a much more important element of identity than 'nationality', a term that most subjects would not have understood". Religious practices (instead of spoken languages) were significant markers for the peasantry, not least because the level of literacy remained below 50% until the end of the imperial era.

Even if the aim of the government was not to "de-nationalise" non-Russian peoples, it did adopt policies to reinforce political centralisation and the use of Russian as the single official language in the empire. These policies intensified after the failed Polish insurrection in 1863 and are often considered the first phase of "Russification" (Weeks 2013, 200–201). It is worth noting that despite the various government measures in relation to different nations (for example, Poles faced strict Russification measures at the time but Finns did not), the view on nationality *in general* developed: it began to mark a category that existed naturally in the world and within the empire. Emil Pain describes the period from 1863 until 1890 as the "advent of ethnic Russian nationalism", when the idea of nationalities developed into a more political one. At the turn of the century, the view of ethnic groups' (*narodnost'*) potential transformation towards political nations (*natsiya*) started to gain ground. From this perspective, ethnic Russians were the "state-forming nation" (*gosudarstvobrazuyushchaya natsiya*), entitled to a privileged status vis-à-vis other nations (Miller 2012, 48). Around the same time, "the national question" had already become a political keyword, referring mainly to (ethnic) separatism at that time (Pain 2018, 25).

The empire's repressive nationality policies were one trigger in creating the conditions for the revolution in 1905 (Plokhly 2017, 160). Nicholas II's government made significant concessions in the October manifesto, which for the first time introduced limitations to the tsar's power in favour of the people, although it did not fully settle the questions that had led to the revolution. Therefore, the event is sometimes depicted as a prologue to the 1917 October revolution. The national question was superseded in the government's interests only by the outbreak of World War I in the summer of 1914, but it soon became evident that both the governments and national movements aimed to advance their goals in the war – and later the Russian Civil War

(Weeks 2013, 202–204). Many national movements saw their chance to seek stronger autonomy or even independence from the Russian empire.

The contemporary political leadership in Russia treats the historical narrative of Russia's revolutions with caution. This became particularly clear during 2017, the year of the centennial commemoration of the October Revolution. The commemoration of "the Russian Revolution of 1917" (*Rossiiskaya revolyutsiya 1917 goda*) – the name merging the two revolutions in February and in October that has recently gained popularity – proved challenging for the state authorities because it also raised the question of the current stance towards Soviet history in general, requiring commentary on the "founding myth" of the USSR (Malinova 2018). Publication IV finds that President Putin has compared demands for social change in the present to revolutionary sentiments in the past, making the point that nobody wants "too radical" changes. The key problem embedded in commemorating 1917 was, thus, on the one hand, that the shared memories could not be merged into one narrative: the state leadership could not encourage simultaneously celebrating the tsar and those who murdered him. On the other hand, condemning revolutionary behaviour in the present while celebrating a revolution in the past was simply not sustainable. In this sense, revolutions as such are not considered the "usable past" by the state leadership.

5.2 THE SOVIET UNION: "NATIONALISM" CONDEMNED

The obvious break in all of the periodisations of Russian history was the end of the Romanov empire and the October Revolution. The political reality and language transformed fundamentally in and after 1917. According to the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, *nationalism* did not (and could not) exist in the country because it was the converse of the *internationalism* that the whole Soviet Union was supposed to be built on. The contents of the desired form of internationalism fluctuated over the years, which affected the way in which "the nation" was perceived (see e.g. Pain 2018, 27). The balance between antithetical concepts remained up to the late Soviet years: internationalism and patriotism represented key values of the Communist doctrine, whereas nationalism and cosmopolitanism were denounced as bourgeois ideologies (Kettunen 2018, 349). These dichotomies, as will be suggested in publication II, had a strong impact on the interpretations of nationalism as a concept in post-Soviet Russian language. By using the concept of nationalism as an analytical frame one may, however, point to several phenomena in the Soviet reality: the logic of managing ethnic relations within the new multiethnic state; (ethnic) Russian nationalism, emerging in the margins of society and in the dissident movement, especially since the 1960s; and the "nationality question" that again surfaced in the perestroika years and that contributed significantly

to the collapse of the Union in 1991. Next, I will briefly discuss these “nationalisms” in the Soviet Union and their connection to the nationalist argumentation in the present.

During the Civil War, the Bolsheviks had assured national minorities the right to self-determination, as a means of gaining their support in fighting the White Army. In the Bolshevik vision, after the eventual world revolution, everyone would live in “classless and nationless Communist republics of workers and peasants” (Scherbak 2015, 871). In practice, the actual policy adopted in the 1920s was something of a compromise between the Communist interpretation and the “greatest danger principle”, which saw great-power (or Great Russian) chauvinism as a more fundamental risk than local nationalism (Martin 2007, 7; Smith 2019, 976). The federal structure of the Soviet Union was decided in the autumn of 1922, and it guaranteed the national minorities some autonomy in the form of national republics and other federal subjects, thought to ensure the integrity of the Soviet Union in the future.

There was a clear difference between this version of the nationalities policy and the one it transformed into around the mid-1930s. Emil Pain (2018, 27–28) points out that Josif Stalin, like other Communists, initially supported Lenin’s nationality doctrine, but his views changed by the early 1930s. It was then that Stalin’s mistrust towards non-Russians started to deepen, and the decision to include a nationality category in passports in 1932 enabled the Soviet authorities to target members of “suspicious minorities” (Weeks 2013, 210). Including nationality in passports was a crucial move in institutionalising and codifying ethnicity, and it remained unchanged until the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Smith 2019, 977–978; Brubaker 1996, 30–31).²⁰

Massive ethnic persecutions took place in the 1930s, and mass deportations followed in the 1940s. Towards the Second World War, Stalin’s emphasis on ethnic Russianness became undeniable. As Serhii Plokhyy (2017, 257) describes, Stalin had “abandoned the communist dreams of the 1920s about a victorious world revolution” and started to prepare for a defensive war both against Germany and Japan. In this process, non-Russian peoples had become “potential turncoats”, and the primary goal was to ensure the loyalty of Russians, the largest Soviet nationality. Andrey Shcherbak (2015, 872–873) calls the years between 1940 and 1955 the period of “great-power Russian nationalism”.

²⁰ According to Jeremy Smith (2019, 978–979), the fact that the federal state structure or the ascription of nationality in passports went unchallenged after their adoption shows that these features had become an institutional setting rather than features of a coherent “policy”. After the early 1930s, the decisions on nationality issues were made in negotiations between the central authorities and the regional leaders, instead of being conducted as a part of a clear, periodically evolving programme.

The primacy of ethnic Russianness in the official discourse intensified during the war, and some non-Russian nationalities were portrayed as suspicious. Stalin's speech after the war on May 24, 1945, clearly demonstrated that the state leadership's attitude towards minority nationalities had changed in word and deed.²¹ The wartime rhetoric paved the way for campaigns against "traitors" at the end of the 1940s and in the early 1950s when, for example, Soviet Jews were severely repressed as a part of Stalin's campaign against "cosmopolitanism". These persecutions only ended with Stalin's death in 1953 (Weeks 2013, 210; Pain 2018, 28–29).

During the thaw in the 1960s, the Russian *intelligentsiya* fostered the growth of nationalist sentiments in society. A crucial factor in this was Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation programme, which enabled debate on political matters, although the debate did not take place within the party system but in literary journals – a vital tradition in the pre-revolutionary era. The cultural elite were divided into two camps, those that campaigned for further de-Stalinisation, for example in the journal *Novyi mir*, and the conservatives who were critical of it, who formed around the journals *Molodaya gvardiya* and *Oktyabr*. Taken together, these circles created a new foundation for Russian nationalism upon which genuinely dissident views could also evolve (Brudny 2009, 32).

At the same time, a literary trend of "village prose" (*derevyannaya proza*) started to form. The way it romanticized "the provincial" could be seen in a wider, transnational context – the nostalgic imagery of a simple country life was strong in the modern-era literature elsewhere as well. In the Russian context, village prose had an underlying tone of (ethnic) Russian nationalism. During the 1970s, writers became the only "officially permitted and even encouraged" group of nationalistically minded Russian intellectuals as part of the state's co-optation strategy (Brudny 2009, 56; Plokhly 2017, 291–292). Some nationalist-religious groups were even allowed to organise, as the KGB was hoping to foment an internal battle between the liberal-minded and conservative forces in society that way (Pain 2018, 30). For these reasons, by the mid-1970s, nationalism as promoted by those dissident groups had become a significant societal force. Representatives of dissident nationalism – among them writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn – drew on the Slavophile legacy in their search for "the Russian idea". Susanna Rabow-Edling (2006, 141–142) notes, however, that the village writers were anti-progressive in a way that the Slavophiles had never been: they rejected modernisation as such as a "non-Russian" phenomenon, something that would cause moral degeneration (see also Yanov 1987, 19).

²¹ In his toast honouring military officers, Stalin described the Russian people as "the leading force of our Soviet Union among all the peoples of our country", having merited that title "in this war and earlier" (address cited in Plokhly 2017, 274–275, and Weeks 2013, 211).

In the 1980s, the 1960s generation (*shestidesyatniki*) gained political power. Mikhail Gorbachev was a rather odd representative of this generation, bringing his educated but optimistic and Soviet-patriotic mindset to the Kremlin (Zubok 2009, 335–336). According to Weeks (2013), Gorbachev had no experience with nationality issues, having only worked as a party functionary in the Stavropol region, where he was born, and in Moscow, suggesting that this shortcoming led to mistakes from the beginning of his era as General Secretary.²² Around 1985, Gorbachev introduced glasnost, the openness policy, calculating that it would ensure the success of the reform policies, as public criticism of the evident problems would hinder his opponents (Brown 2007, 92). With glasnost, the “national question”, still suppressed during the Brezhnev years, reappeared in the language of Soviet politics. Even if the roots of the conflict were much more complex (Smith 2019, 988–989), the violence that broke out in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1987 was – and continues to be – interpreted as a grave example of the ethnic tensions within the Soviet Union that were now surfacing. At the same time, many Soviet republics started to seek and realise policy choices that were independent of the political core of the USSR. For example, by the end of 1989, several Soviet republics, starting with the Baltic states, had adopted laws that required all residents to learn the titular language (Weeks 2013, 215).

At the same time, political reform proceeded at a fast pace. In spring 1989, relatively free elections were held in the USSR for the first time since 1917. The creation of the Congress of People’s Deputies undermined the power of the Communist party and the political centre as a whole, which was a decisive step in the disintegration process. As Serhii Plokhy (2017, 302) puts it, “all of a sudden, people everywhere began to feel that their polities were being mistreated by the government in Moscow.” The failed coup attempt in August 1991 finally demonstrated that the political reality had transformed in an irreversible way, and not in the way that Gorbachev had planned. On 1 December, an agreement signed by Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk and Stanislaŭ Shushkevich, the new Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian leaders, formally dissolved the Soviet Union.

Pål Kolstø (2000, 229–231) notes that from the very beginning of Soviet rule, an attempt to designate all nationalities a “home” territory persisted. Important exceptions to this rule notwithstanding – not all diasporas or small titular groups had their own ethnically-defined territory, and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic was not a formal state of ethnic Russians – “the link between ethnicity and territoriality was both strong and institutionalised”. By the late 1980s, the political exploitation of territoriality

²² One such miscalculation was appointing an ethnic Russian as First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party in 1986, which led to violence in the region (Weeks 2013, 215).

had developed into a phase whereby it served as a weapon against either “alien” ethnic elements residing in the national territory or the “occupants”. In a similar vein, as Andrey Shcherbak (2015, 875) has argued, the political nationalism of the late 1980s was predicted by the cultural nationalism of the Soviet Union: broad cultural autonomy was originally guaranteed in order to compensate for the thin legitimacy of the supraethnic Soviet identity. Moreover, when that supranational identity ceased to exist, “the void was filled with particularistic, exclusive ethnic identities”. Yet both the territorial vision of nationalities policies as well as the support of cultural nationalism through institutions were of an earlier origin than the Gorbachev years.

Nationalism did not “destroy” the Soviet Union, as Theodore Weeks (2013, 215–217) points out. Instead, it happened due to the systemic weakness that became evident in the context of intensifying international competition. The profound shift of the late 1980s in understanding “us”, or “the nation”, in political and public discourse marked a break in the continuum. The strengthening of the “ethnic” understanding of the nation altered political realities in many regions of the Union (see e.g. Kolstø 2000, 231). In publication II, I propose that since it was indeed “the national question” (*natsional’nyi vopros*)²³ that had such a significant impact on the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the meanings attached to the concept of nationalism in Russia today are inevitably linked to that process. Even though the Soviet Union was ethnically much more diverse than the Russian Federation,²⁴ fear of separatism and inter-ethnic tensions feature in contemporary policy-making, especially in the context of nationalities policy.

Until the fall of the Soviet Union, nationalism, as a word, was condemned because it represented a malign feature of bourgeois societies. Nevertheless, what can be categorised as nationalist ideas existed, developed and were contested also in the Soviet Union throughout its existence. Thus, late Soviet or post-Soviet nationalism(s) should not be understood as “new”, and they were not “born” when the ideological basis of the state began to erode – but, at that moment, the ideas connected to the nation had to be re-thought.

²³ In this context, it is worth noting the widespread “return-of-the-repressed” view on post-communist nationalisms, which Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000, 25–26) have criticised for simplifying the Soviet regime’s approach to nationhood. They write: “Although *antinationalist*, and of course brutally repressive in all kinds of ways, the Soviet regime was anything but *anti-national*. Far from ruthlessly suppressing nationhood, the regime went to unprecedented lengths in institutionalising and codifying it.”

²⁴ Often-quoted figures for the share of “ethnic Russians” in the Soviet Union and in the Russian Federation are around 50 and 80 per cent respectively, based on the census data from 1989 and 2010 (See e.g. Sakwa 1998, 245).

5.3 POST-SOVIET RUSSIA: NEW FRAMES FOR THE NATION

The fall of the Soviet Union remains a formative experience in the nationalist discourses and practices of the region. As Marlène Laruelle points out, while people had hoped for change, they had not wished for the Soviet state to disappear. In the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin's administration wanted to distance itself from the Soviet past by stressing Russia's future as developed, democratic and free. However, the early years of the new state were marred by ordeals: the economy deteriorated, crime increased, and the constitutional battle between the President and the parliament culminated in the autumn of 1993 when army tanks shelled the Russian White House in Moscow. The following year, the brutal war began in Chechnya. In 1998, the economic crisis peaked, with the rouble collapsing and poverty further increasing. Taken together, these failures of "democratic" Russia have had a long-lasting impact on Russia's domestic development (Laruelle 2009, 18), but they have also inevitably affected the way in which the past is being portrayed in the shared history. Serguei A. Oushakine (2009, 7) has described how the feeling of loss translated into ideas of national belonging, which did not emerge from events in one's private life, but the shared experience of "losing a Motherland". He argues that the "patriotism of despair" of the 1990s has provided the main support base for Russia's new, assertive national identity in the 2000s. Indeed, the trope of "the turbulent 1990s", especially in contrast to "the stable 2000s", has remained commonplace in public discourse (Malinova 2020) and, as shown in publication III, has frequently been exploited by the President.

Yeltsin's administration adopted a "civic" interpretation of the nation by consistently using the concept of *rossiyane* to describe the citizens of the Russian Federation regardless of their ethnicity. However, by the mid-1990s it was clear that this identity was not emotionally embraced by the people, and after his re-election as president in 1996, Yeltsin urged Russian society to search for a new "Russian national idea". The initiative proved problematic because promoting such ideas was not seen as the state's responsibility in the first place, and because evoking pride in a strong state was impossible when that state was clearly in a weak condition (Tolz 1998, 1008; 1010–1011). Thus, even if the state administration had rhetorically endorsed the "de-ethnicised" model of nation-building, it could not provide credible content for the new identity.

At the same time, the state narrative had to find its place among several alternative discourses on the nation. As early as the Brezhnev era, the radical conservative groups had begun to develop their ideas on distinctive Russianness which, according to them, needed to be protected from Western "cultural, ideological, or military" aggression by a strong state and a capable leader (Brudny 2009, 11–12). These groups were vocal opponents of

perestroika, and by 1991 many of the Orthodox-monarchist and neo-Stalinist groups had become politically active. In the early 1990s, the so-called “red-brown” coalition, bringing together religious monarchists and Communists, as well as other conservative-nationalist streams of thought such as the neo-Eurasian movement, started to gain strength as a counter-force to Yeltsin’s reforms in the 1990s, and especially after the economic crisis in 1998. Thomas Parland (2005, 2–3) argues that the traditionalist groups became “gradually overshadowed” by more radical and secular currents of “Westernized” nationalism that also catered for extreme forms of fascism, national socialism and rightist authoritarianism. In the early 2000s, the skinhead movement, the extra-parliamentary National Bolshevik party, and the Movement Against Illegal Immigration gained popularity, especially among the young generations (Laruelle 2009, 49–63).

When economic growth started to revive, the state leadership could again attempt to induce pride in serving and belonging to the Russian state, which proved more successful under Vladimir Putin than it had been under Yeltsin. In the 2000s, the state structures were centralized, symbolic measures were taken to emphasise national identity, and new policies such as introducing patriotic education programmes were adopted. Publication III shows the development of the state rhetoric since the early 2000s, noting that at the beginning of his rule, Putin used the experiences of the 1990s as a legitimising trope for the need for a strong state and “stability”. However, after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the Russian state authorities became increasingly troubled by the “foreign influence” within Russia’s borders, potentially causing unrest in Russia. In the years that followed, the Kremlin began to increasingly emphasise the external threat to the sovereignty of Russia, which also began to appear in the presidential rhetoric concerning the competition between Russia and its Others (III, pp. 13–15). In particular, Vladislav Surkov, presidential advisor at the time, advanced his vision of “sovereign democracy”, which perceived the Western model of democratisation as unfit for Russia. Surkov’s initiatives strongly reflected the conservative tradition of the country, demanding any political change to be “organically” formed in compliance with the tradition of the nation. Around the same time, the state authorities sought to enhance the idea of distinctive “Russianness”, for example by establishing a new national holiday, the Day of National Unity, on 4 November.

To this day, it is not clear what kind of nation, exactly, is to be celebrated on this holiday. The state discourse adopted the expression ‘multinational Russian nation’ in 1993, but the policies were ambiguous at a practical level. Oxana Shevel has argued that since all of the alternative nation-building strategies at the Russian state’s disposal have been problematic, the

authorities employed the discourse on “compatriots”,²⁵ representatives of the national “us” living outside the borders of Russia proper, to “legalize the ambiguity” of the nation-building strategy. According to Shevel (2011, 199), this enabled the state authorities to postpone the resolving of nation-building strategies, and both the ambiguity as well as the emphasis on compatriots seem to be crucial aspects of Russia’s nationalities policy in the 2020s. In addition, it is perhaps emblematic that the Day of National Unity remains poorly recognized among Russians. Publication I analyses the claims and political position of the various radical nationalist groups, the only ones annually celebrating the new holiday by organising their “Russian marches” mainly in the suburbs of Moscow.

The scholarly analysis of contemporary Russia’s “conservative”, “authoritarian” or even “nationalist” turn²⁶ after 2012 brings to mind Aleksandr Yanov’s depiction of Russian intellectual history as a cyclical process of reformist attempts and counter-reformist responses. Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner (2020, 3) suggest that the change took place gradually between the years 2007 and 2012. In the foreign policy sphere, President Vladimir Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 has been interpreted as a turning point in Russia’s alienation from the NATO-oriented West, and the tensions grew the following year with the Kosovo declaration of independence and the Georgian war. At the same time, domestic politics were re-defined: Suslov and Uzlaner argue that the manoeuvre to replace Putin with less known and less popular President Dmitri Medvedev demanded more ideological tone in securing domestic legitimacy. With the economic stagnation stemming from the global financial crisis, the new policy of “conservative modernisation” became a cornerstone for the ruling party after 2009. Moreover, the enthroning of Metropolitan Kirill as the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2009 contributed to enhancing the conservative value basis in Russian society.

The implementation of conservative-authoritarian politics became most apparent after the winter of 2011–2012, when mass protests took place in Russia’s big cities. After the ceremonial announcement of Putin’s return to the presidential office in September 2011, fraud in the November 2011 Duma elections triggered demonstrations against the political leadership. The fragmented, liberal extra-parliamentary opposition seemed to have found common ground. First, the regime reacted with limited liberalisation of some democratic procedures, but many of the “slight openings” were again closed

²⁵ The definition of “compatriot” has, in a similar way, been vague, but the idea of the Russian language as the common denominator is persistent (see e.g. Zamyatin 2018, 53–54).

²⁶ I would interpret all of these conceptualisations as referring to the same phenomenon, even though the emphasis may vary. For these examples, see Suslov & Uzlaner 2020; Feldmann & Mazepus 2018; Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2018, 7.

when Putin's third term as president began and the state authorities curbed possibilities for any political contention by introducing legislation to control the media and non-governmental organisations (Hale et al. 2019, 172–173). Publication IV demonstrates how, since 2012, traditional values as a unifying feature of the nation have become apparent in the presidential discourse: speaking in front of the Federal Assembly in December 2012, Putin lamented, hinting at the unrest, that the country was experiencing “an obvious deficit of spiritual bonds” (*yavnyi defitsit dukhovnykh skrep*) that had always made the country strong and powerful. The discourse on “spiritual-moral values” became a matter of national security (Østbø 2017; Strategy of national security 2015, articles 11 & 78), and in that respect, it soon acquired a foreign policy aspect. The traditional Russian values were not only distinguished from the liberal, “Western” ones, but they were also portrayed as being under threat globally. In this regard, Russia's role as a state to “defend” them became pronounced (see also publication III).

The consolidation of the conservative-authoritarian trend in politics, as well as the ambiguous nation-building strategies that combined distinctive Russianness, an external threat, and the emphasis on compatriots, all became manifested in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea. President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich had turned down the Association Agreement with the EU in November 2013, which caused considerable popular unrest in Kyiv – resulting in the ousting of Yanukovich – and made the Kremlin recalculate its policy towards Ukraine. After the festive closing ceremony of the Sochi Winter Olympics, Russian soldiers arrived in Simferopol, and a “referendum” was held in March 2014 (Plokyh 2017, 336–337). The discourse on the Russian world (*Russkii mir*) was reproduced in Putin's justification for the move when he explained that there were “our people” living on the peninsula who needed to be protected (Teper 2016; see also Torbakov 2015). The annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine created new, internal divisions in the Russian debate on the nation. The official discourse celebrated the event, and opinion polls showed strong support for the annexation, but the annexation and the war in Ukraine shattered the mental image of Russians and Ukrainians as one people, still embraced by many (Plokyh 2017, 345).

The left-right or conservative-liberal axis often falls short in depicting the post-Soviet currents of nationalist thought. In addition to ideological differences, the movements have also been categorised according to the proximity to or distance from the formal power structures. For example, in her book published in 2009, Marlène Laruelle distinguished the thinking within the party of power, United Russia, from the populist versions of nationalism developed by the Liberal-Democratic Party and Communist party, which both represent the so-called “systemic opposition” of the State Duma. The extra-parliamentary movements can be divided along similar lines, as shown in publication I: the “dissentful” or oppositional nationalists promote policy

changes different from those voiced by “consentful” actors, who support the Kremlin’s line. The oppositional nationalist groups were still able to function in many ways during 2012–2013 – at the time, anti-migrant messages were even endorsed in state-aligned television (Hutchings & Tolz 2015) – but after the annexation of Crimea, they became both more dispersed and more controlled by the state.

In the 2010s, the boundaries between those representing “radical” nationalist views and those representing state power became more fluid. In her more recent typology, Laruelle (2019, 10) defined four main camps of contemporary nationalism(s) in Russia: official groups that function within the state apparatus; co-opted statist nationalists who support the regime but who might, nevertheless, express critical views; mid-opposition nationalists who enjoy some support from the state but cannot rely on it; and full opposition nationalists, who function openly and directly against the state. Yet the nationalist groups are hardly ever univocal, and diverse ideas about the nation, its characteristics, and its borders within a single collective also exist.

Describing contemporary Russia as “post-Soviet” encourages interpretations of “the Soviet” as bygone. Yet many Soviet characteristics are still present in Russian society – after all, the country was not built *from scratch* but *on ruins*, to put it metaphorically. In her book focusing on the remnants and new features of totalitarianism in Russia, Masha Gessen (2017, 2) writes that “perhaps the assumption that it [the Soviet regime] collapsed needed to be questioned”. The layers of the Soviet and imperial past are intrinsically present in the discourses of today even though the dramatic political discontinuities would cause one to think otherwise. Historical “ingredients” are sources of political claim-making and become manifested in shared histories of society, justifying – in both instances – the role and nature of the nation as a continuous and essential agent of history.

6 SUMMARIES OF THE PUBLICATIONS

The publications that make up this dissertation illuminate the nature of nationalist language in Russia during the 2000s and show how, and why, that language has changed during the past two decades. The research process has not followed a chronological or linear path; instead, the results obtained during the earlier research stages have inspired and motivated further questions. In this vein, the four publications have guided the work from one perspective to another.

Essentially, the publications offer four perspectives on the nationalist argumentation in Russia, analysing nationalism through the lens of political contention and a conceptual battle. In this battle, the boundaries of the nation are drawn by defining who “we” are, who are excluded as “Others”, and what it is exactly that “we” as a nation share. The state leadership seeks to maintain its power and position in the shared societal space of nationalist argumentation by controlling the challenge from oppositional radical nationalists, but also by reformulating its argument when needed, and these developments connect the nationalist argumentation to the question of state legitimacy. In the following, I will summarise the approach, material, and key arguments of each publication and explain how these publications contribute to the study of nationalism(s) in Russia.

Publication I: Contemporary Russian nationalisms: the state, nationalist movements, and the shared space in between

Publication I approaches nationalism through the prism of various actors who use it as an argument, and who compete over the shared societal space. The primary material was collected from online sources, starting from January 2011 until December 2015, encapsulating the change in the field during and in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. During this time, I followed the blogs, webpages and social media content produced by the various nationalist movements organised around the annual Russian March event, as well as those actors that appeared during the timeframe to show support for the state. In order to trace the Kremlin’s measures vis-à-vis different forms of nationalist contention, the primary material was supplemented with news sources.

In this publication, nationalism is analysed in the context of political contention in a hybrid (or authoritarian) regime, and the theories on state mobilisation strategies have guided the analysis. In particular, the conceptualisation of dissentful and consentful forms of political contention by Ammon Cheskin and Luke March was applied in order to produce a more nuanced understanding of state co-optation. They suggest that research would benefit from acknowledging that political contention “can situate claim-

making along the axes of consentful and dissentful motivations, and compliant and contentious behaviours” (Cheskin and March 2015, 262).

The key differences in the language used by the “dissentful” nationalists and the state arise from their views on migration, race, and Russia’s “desired” borders. For the vocal radical nationalists, “Russianness” is a more restricted concept than that which the state rhetoric proposes. Their message is focused on resisting migration, in which they include people from the Caucasian republics, who are treated as “non-Russians” even though they are Russian citizens. The Russian March, the key event for dissentful nationalist groups, is advertised with openly racist messages. Some of the nationalists who advocate creating a “Russian nation-state” in their online messages also make claims related to democracy and national representation, which keeps them in opposition to the state authorities.

Publication I shows that whereas still in 2012–2013 the state strategy was to tolerate but monitor and manage the radical, dissentful nationalist movements, after 2014, they became directly controlled. The shift had to do with the Kremlin’s overall intention to diminish any political contention after 2011–2012, but the radical nationalists were still functional in the Kremlin’s strategy until late 2013. I argue that the radical (dissentful) nationalists played a certain role in the Kremlin’s strategy to build societal consensus upon xenophobic anti-migrant attitudes, but when this strategy partly fuelled the ethnically-motivated clashes around Moscow in late 2013, it was abandoned. However, as the dissentful nationalists encountered increasingly controlling measures after 2014, new, consentful actors appeared in the shared space. The publication suggests that these movements may prove more extreme than the Kremlin line they seem to support, and that there is no reason to assume that the consentful nationalists would decline ethnically motivated nationalist claims. These factors were mentioned as adding uncertainty to the “shared space” of nationalism in society in the future.

After the crisis in Ukraine began, the already heterogeneous field of nationalist movements grew even more splintered internally: some oppositional nationalists supported the Ukrainian uprisings, whereas other groups chanted for the Crimean annexation, and demanded even wider offensives in Ukraine and “Novorossiia” (a term that the state rhetoric never fully endorsed, but that inspired nationalist groups for years). Moreover, there was evidence of voluntary fighters from Russian nationalist groupings leaving for both sides of the war in Ukraine. The Russian March, the annual event gathering together various radical nationalist groups on November 4, split into several small events in 2015, which all had a very modest turnout around Moscow. Since then, this has continued to be the case: the nationalists

continue to celebrate the Day of National Unity in parallel events, each decreasing in size year after year.²⁷

A few remarks on the “shared space” of nationalism could be added to the findings presented in the publication. Since 2015, some of the new “consentful” actors that emerged in the “shared space” between the radical nationalists and the state have remained active, but not all of them. For example, Anti-Maidan as a label has practically disappeared even though individuals and groups that formed a coalition under that name in 2015, such as the motorcycle club Night Wolves, continue to exist. The Rodina party won one seat in the State Duma elections in 2016 and endorsed Vladimir Putin instead of their own candidate in the presidential elections in 2018.

The National-Liberation Movement (*Natsional'no-osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie*, NOD) has continued its activities under the leadership of United Russia Duma Deputy Evgeny Fedorov. Deemed “rather insignificant” in 2015 by Sova Center analyst Natalia Yudina, NOD has hardly become more mainstream in the Russian media sphere since then. It boasts about regional offices and a variety of events, but these appear rather marginal. The organisation has shifted from using the slogan “*Rodina, svoboda, Putin*” (Motherland, freedom, Putin) to advocating direct anti-Americanism. Yet despite its small size, NOD may still have certain influence as a support organisation for the president within Russian nationalist circles. For example, the organisation has since 2016 campaigned for constitutional amendments that would “secure the sovereignty of the Russian state” by abolishing the statement in Russia’s jurisdiction respecting international agreements and norms (*Natsional'no-osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie*, 2020). Not suggesting that NOD would have had any direct impact on the constitutional change carried out in 2020, the amendments included a statement that decisions made by international organs are not implemented in Russia if they contradict the Russian constitution (*Gosudarstvennaya дума 2020*, article 79).

Another potential embedded in the “consentful” nationalist movements is that they maintain close connections with like-minded nationalist-conservative parties abroad and, in this way, market the international appeal of Russian nationalism. For example, the leader of the youth wing of the NOD, Maria Katasonova, has praised Marine Le Pen in social media and hosted her visit to Moscow in 2017 (de Haldevang 2017). The official discourse, not limited to the presidential rhetoric, stresses Russia’s traditional values as enjoying support worldwide (Patrushev 2020), so this aspect may be welcomed by the state authorities.

²⁷ According to Sova Center monitoring, the turnout for events organised in Moscow in 2019 was at a record low. In 2020, none of the Russian Marches of the nationalist groups obtained permission from the authorities because of the Covid-19 pandemic (Sova 2019 & 2020).

Publication I concludes that the Kremlin's attempt to dominate the shared space of nationalist argumentation in Russia is risky for at least two reasons: first, the xenophobic attitudes that had eased since 2013 could become more popular again in the future, and second, the "consentful" nationalist actors could, given time, adopt a more extreme line of activities and ideas than the state leadership would hope for. These themes will be discussed from a broader perspective in the next chapter.

Publication II: "Biggest nationalist in the country": Self-descriptive uses of "nationalist" in contemporary Russia

Publication I demonstrated aspects of the conceptual and political battle over nationalism between those using state power and those challenging it. The study found that the president himself had declared himself a "nationalist", extending the conventional uses of the concept, which was interpreted in the publication as a way to further disarm the dissentful, oppositional nationalist actors. However, the case raised further questions on the uses of nationalism and nationalist in contemporary Russian political discourses. These questions are addressed in publication II.

While it remains debatable whether nationalism should be categorised as an ideology – or more precisely, what kind of ideology it represents (Freeden 2005, 207), the significance of nationalism as a political idea and label is unquestionable. The puzzle presented in publication II stems from two contradictory notions: that the self-descriptive use is rarely connected to nationalism (Koselleck 2006, 235–237), and yet, there are cases in contemporary politics (not only in Russia) where self-descriptive uses have indeed been a way to re-define the content and position of nationalism. Following Jani Marjanen and Jussi Kurunmäki, the publication treats isms as multi-layered, temporal and contested concepts that have significant rhetorical potential. They are often framed in political debates in a way that presents complex ideas as one simple whole. Marjanen and Kurunmäki call for attention to be paid to the "wrong" uses of isms because they enlighten the rhetorical possibilities embedded in them. Moreover, referring to invective isms, they suggest that:

[t]he processes in which certain groups have chosen to make particular isms self-descriptions of their intellectual or political position or have ceased to protest the label imposed on them should be regarded as key instances in which ideological formations are renegotiated. (Marjanen & Kurunmäki 2018, 273)

In this way, publication II suggests that an "instance of renegotiation" of nationalism is currently happening in present-day Russia.

The primary material consists of 54 central and regional newspaper articles collected from the Russian-language database *Integrum* between January 2008 and December 2018. The analysis of the texts confirmed that “nationalist” is a concept that carries a negative connotation, even stigma, that the speakers “explained away” in various ways. Those labelling themselves as nationalists created distance between themselves and the negative connotations in various ways, adding positive values to the concept in the form of epithets, describing their interpretation of nationalism as “good” or “healthy”, for example. Or they gave the concept new meanings, duly producing a conceptual innovation, such as insisting that nationalism, for them, “did not mean what it meant to other people”. This strategy was applied, for instance, by oppositional nationalists, who denied the connotations related to violence or “hooliganism” by explaining that, for them, nationalism was a purely theoretical way of thinking. Moreover, a commonplace rhetorical move was to position nationalism within a semantic network either by comparing it to a more stigmatising concept, such as fascism, or likening it to a clearly positive concept, such as patriotism.

In addition, I was interested in whether the president’s statement on his being a nationalist had “widened the conditions” of possible uses of the concept in the public discourse. This was not confirmed in the material: only two texts referred to the president’s claim directly, and the number of self-descriptive uses had not increased after the president’s two examples. However, the material in the study is too limited in scope to conclude that this could not have taken place in other forums, such as online or on social media platforms. Moreover, the presidential statements reframing nationalism as something desired and respected – especially if they reappear – could still convince other key politicians or influential individuals to use “nationalist” in novel ways, or contribute by other means to making nationalism more socially acceptable in the future.

Another important finding in the publication is that all of the speakers in the material discussed nationalism in the context of inter-ethnic relations or minority nationalism in Russia (topics that the president rarely touches upon, as will be shown in publication IV). Thus, the president’s re-definition of nationalism, which combined “multinationality” with the primacy of ethnic Russians as a state-forming nation, was not embraced by other speakers describing themselves as nationalists. This finding highlights the ambiguity of the “ethnic” component of the nationalist argument in the Russian political discourse. For many of the speakers in the material, a “nationalist” not connected to a certain ethnicity simply does not seem possible, which is why the president’s conceptual innovation appears thin. In this way, the results of the publication encouraged further analysis of the content of the nationalist argument in the presidential discourse, and the role that ethnicity (broadly understood) plays in it.

Publication III: Evolution of Russia's 'Others' in presidential discourse in 2000–2020

Publications I and II focused on the nature of nationalism and how it is manifested in the internal debates within Russian politics and society. Publication III continues to examine the nationalist argument by analysing the portrayal of the nation in presidential discourse. In this way, the focus moves from the domestic sphere to the portrayal of Russia and Russianness in the wider spatial and temporal context: presidential rhetoric situates the nation both in the world and in relation to its past, present and future.

The publication is part of a book entitled *Nexus of Patriotism and Militarism in Russia: A Quest for Internal Cohesion* (Pynnöniemi 2021), which studies othering and enemy images produced in the political rhetoric, as well as various aspects of patriotism, drawing linkages between these and the role of the military sector in Russian society. The publication illuminates the background of state nationalism in Russia and, in so doing, starts from the idea that constructing a nation is simultaneously a process of drawing, maintaining and defending boundaries between “us” and “them”. Nationalist argumentation rests upon the assumption that “our” characteristics make us as a nation distinct from “Others”, who in a similar way have their distinctive characteristics.²⁸ Yet the “Other” in this publication is understood as multilayered: it can be internal, external, or temporal, and not restricted to another state or nation.

Methodologically, the publication is based on Rieke Schäfer's (2012) notion that figurative language plays a crucial role in conceptual and political change. A collection of 21 presidential addresses to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation was analysed in order to trace the reappearing metaphors and concepts depicting Russia's and Russians' relationship to their Others. The president, also utilising the State-as-Person metaphor, describes Russia as being either strong or weak compared to its Others. In the context of foreign policy, the metaphor of competition acquired different characteristics: at the beginning of the 2000s, it was predominantly economic, and the main Other consisted of the Western (European) countries that were ahead in the competition and thus portrayed as models for Russia. Towards the end of the 2010s, however, the competition ceased to be primarily economic and transformed qualitatively into a military and “moral” one. In this phase, Russia was depicted as being under an external threat, but it had simultaneously grown stronger in relation to its Other. Gradually, from the mid-2000s onwards, the moral aspect gains importance: according to this rhetoric, Russia continues to preserve and defend the traditional values that Europe no longer

²⁸ As Michael Billig (1995, 83) notes, “foreigners are not simply ‘others’, symbolizing the obverse of ‘us’: they are also like ‘us’, part of the imagined universal code of nationhood”.

shares. After 2014–2015, the competition becomes a conflict, and the Other, meaning the West and the US in particular, is depicted as having taken the side of the Enemy, which makes Russia alone capable of and morally fit for fighting the evil in the world.

From the perspective of state legitimacy, the internal, temporal Others had a significant role. During Vladimir Putin's first presidential term, he described the inefficient state officials as a reason for Russia's weakness, and distanced "us" from the chaotic past. The representation of the 1990s as tumultuous persisted until the end of the study period, but the inefficient state official of the past was replaced with a corrupt middle-level bureaucrat in the present.

Thus, the publication argues that "stability" and "modernisation", key conceptual innovations until around 2012, gave way to the rhetoric of conflict and external threat during the "conservative turn". Russia's values were still described as rather liberal in President Dmitri Medvedev's parlance, but since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's third term, explicitly conservative values have been stressed. The idea of Russia's values as fundamentally different from those of its Other, "the West", was introduced during a relatively short period but has been consolidated in word and deed. The president has repeatedly described national unity as being achieved through shared values, while the traditional conservative value basis as the unifying feature of the nation has been inscribed in several laws – most importantly in the text of the new Constitution, adopted in 2020. The consistency of this rhetoric and its application in legislation make any conciliatory turn regarding Russia's Others during the current leadership unlikely.

Publication IV: New Generation of Victors: Narrating the Nation in the Russian Presidential Discourse, 2012–2019

Publication IV continues to examine state nationalism through metaphors and narratives. The publication offers insights into the dynamic nature of Russia's political system by asking how the state leadership formulated their nationalist argument between the years 2012 and 2019. The selection of timeframe was motivated by the "conservative" or "authoritarian" turn in Russian domestic and foreign politics after the beginning of Putin's third term as president, and the publication focuses on the changes in nationalist argumentation after that "turn". It draws on theorisations of political legitimacy and "the social contract" between the Russian people and the state, the nature of which is inherently dynamic (Feldmann & Mazepus 2018; Hale et al. 2019). In order to maintain and produce legitimacy in an authoritarian context, the incumbent leaders need to "re-negotiate" the social contract, and nationalist argumentation is understood as a part of this process. The analysis is based on a collection of 35 presidential addresses, consolidated with scholarly literature and relevant opinion polls.

The publication demonstrates that the nationalist argument of the Russian state leadership relies on three distinct, overlapping and mutually reinforcing narratives: the narrative of the multinational nation; the narrative of the victorious nation; and the narrative of the moral nation. First, the narrative of the multinational nation suggests that the historical unity of the nation was born in 1612 when the Muscovites organised themselves against an external threat and ended the Polish invasion. Ever since that year, the unity of the nation has been put to the test in conflicts, most importantly in the Second World War, but the nations have fought “shoulder to shoulder” – and won. Thus, the multinationality of the nation is its eternal feature, and the “strength and beauty” of the country in the present day. The multinational character of the nation, underpinned by the Russian language, culture, and ethnicity, also functions as a distinctive feature of the Russian nation in comparison to other nations, mainly European countries glorifying harmful “multiculturalism”.

Second, the several wars and conflicts in the course of the “thousand-year-long” Russian history have proved that the nation is victorious in nature: it has successfully fought against external threats in order to defend its unity and distinct values. The Great Patriotic War is a formative event that made the nation what it is today. However, the war between good and evil has not ended: international terrorism shows that “peace on this planet is not established by itself”. As the title of the publication suggests, the president draws a parallel between past “victors” and present ones: it is therefore a moral responsibility of the people in the present to recognise their role in the chain of generations by remembering, respecting and defending the memory of the past.

Third, the Russian nation is portrayed as sharing traditional “spiritual-moral” values. These values are not explicitly defined in the presidential speech, but other policy documents – like the Strategy of National Security (2015, article 78) – mention “service to the homeland”, morals and family values, among other things, as the core values of the nation. In the presidential discourse, there is a global division, and the Russian state acts as the defender of traditional values in the world. The spiritual-moral values are under an external threat, but also challenged internally by those advocating values foreign to Russia.

The aspects highlighted in these narratives are selectively derived from Russian and Soviet history. The publication argues that these three narratives were consolidated and bound together after the so-called conservative turn in 2012–2013 and have remained the constitutive element of the state nationalist argument since then. After 2014, the narratives served in justifying the annexation of Crimea and the growing tensions in international relations by stressing a fundamental difference between Russia and “the West”. Previously, some scholars have noted that the annexation of Crimea marked an “ethno-national shift” in the presidential discourse (Teper 2016) but the analysis in this publication does not endorse this view: in the years that followed, the

ethno-national tone did not overtly dominate the presidential speech but rather coexisted with (and within) the narrative of the multinational nation (pp. 525–526). The publication suggests that even though the nationalist argument has now been adjusted to appeal to the conservative part of society, the domestic challenges to the state legitimacy – both latent and visible – remain.

Table 2 *Main arguments of the publications*

Publication	Years studied	Key argument
I	2011–2015	Various actors recognise the appeal of the nationalist argument and want to use it; until 2014, the radical (ethnocentric) nationalists served a certain purpose in the state strategy but since 2014, they have been internally dispersed and partly replaced by the consentful ones in the “shared space” between nationalists and the state.
II	2008–2018	Actors who use the “nationalist” concept in a self-descriptive way in contemporary Russia aim to distance themselves from its negative connotations in two main ways: adding positive values (often in the form of epithets) to the concept, or positioning it within the semantic network, either by comparing it to a more stigmatising concept such as fascism, or likening it to a positive concept such as patriotism. Nationalism is defined in (narrow) ethnic terms throughout the study and used in the context of ethnic relations or tensions. The presidential statements have not (yet) “widened the conditions of possibility”. However, the other speakers in the material do not embrace the president’s conceptual innovation of “multinational” nationalism.
III	2000–2020	In the presidential discourse, three distinctive Others are presented to the Self: The Other in the Past (chaos, weakness, inefficient / corrupt state official); the Other ahead in the competition (but who Russia challenges when the competition transforms from an economic one into a military one); and the Other with different values.
IV	2012–2019	The nationalist argument portrayed in the presidential discourse is formulated with three overlapping and mutually reinforcing narratives of “Russianness”: the narrative of the victorious nation; the narrative of the moral nation; and the narrative of the multinational but ethnically hierarchical nation.

7 THE NATIONALIST ARGUMENT IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN POLITICS

After summarising the key results of each publication in the previous chapter, I will now draw these together under two broader themes to which I believe the dissertation as a whole contributes. The publications confirm, first and foremost, that the nationalist argument is central to the language used by the current state leadership, and that it remains contested in contemporary Russian politics. The state power faces a challenge from other actors using nationalist claims as well as from society, which expects the state authorities to fulfil their part of the “social contract” and drives the state leadership to shape their nationalist argument accordingly. The study provides new insights into nationalism in Russia by mapping the boundaries drawn for “Russianness” in various discourses, and by analysing the nationalist argumentation in relation to state legitimacy. At the same time, the dissertation sheds light on the temporal aspects of nationalism: the past figures in the present ways of defining and representing the nation, but the story of the shared past is constantly re-told. History, in this sense, serves both as a frame for the nationalist argument and provides ingredients for it.

All of the publications have, to varying degrees, benefitted from John Breuilly’s theory of nationalism as an argument. Breuilly emphasises the aspect of power in the political context, which enables a focus on agency instead of seeing nationalism as “rising” like a natural force. Yet political actors may not perceive the nationalism they advance in those terms. As Rogers Brubaker (2004, 116) notes, nationhood is, first and foremost, a category, and nationalism is a way of using that category. Thus, while all nationalist arguments build upon the idea of the nation as the primary group of belonging, they define the boundaries as well as the characteristics of that nation differently. Analysing these explicit and implicit definitions within specific discourses, the actual contents of the nationalist argument can be uncovered. Treating nationalism as an argument helps to contextualise the space within which the meanings, values and contexts of “the nation” are being formulated, positioned and defended against each other. In this way, it allows for a more nuanced understanding of nationalism in society than merely viewing it as an instrument in politics.

Belonging to a nation is often perceived predominantly as a question of identity and membership but, as Eleanor Knott (2017, 223) points out, studies of nationalism would benefit from understanding belonging as a concept of “politics, distance, crisis and contingency” alike. Drawing the boundaries of the nation recognises those who belong and distinguishes “us” from the

“others”. However, these relations do not constitute a dichotomy, but rather a hierarchy: some belong *more* than others, and are more entitled to resources and benefits than those who are conceived as not belonging or not fully belonging within the hierarchy (ibid.). In other words, the question is not only whether an individual belongs to a nation or not, but whether they belong to the nation in an accepted and desired way, and nationalist arguments are used to create these rules of acceptance and desire. Along these lines, nationalism functions according to the logic of inclusion and exclusion, which takes place in language but has clear and real political implications.

Drawing the boundaries of “Russianness”

Considering that nationalist argumentation is about politics and politics is about power, as Breuilly puts it, defining the boundaries of belonging is an arena for competing views. Publication I argued that the actors who challenge the state interpretation of the nation have become strictly controlled and marginalised since 2014. The biggest difference between the claims of the radical, oppositional nationalists and the current state leadership is the anti-migrant and even outright racist message of the former, stressing a restricted interpretation of Russian ethnicity. With their narrow understanding of ethnic Russianness, which excludes Caucasian peoples for example, the radical nationalists pose a challenge to the integrity of the Russian state (even though the popularity of their narrow definition of the “ethnic Russian nation” remains limited among the Russian people (see Shevel 2011, 186; Laruelle 2019)).

The state interpretation of the matter is ambiguous. The presidential discourse upholds a continuous attempt to connect the emphasis on the historical “multinationality” of the nation to the primacy of Russian ethnicity, culture, and language as the unifying features of that same nation. In this way, the state leadership builds upon the imperial vision of Russians as the state-forming nation in relation to the other nationalities living in the country. At the level of policy practices, the assimilative nationalities and language policies of the federation are mixed with the rhetoric of a “civic” Russian nation: for example, while the nationalities policy strategy, amended in 2018, describes all citizens of Russia as equal and sharing a “civic consciousness”, the constitutional amendments in 2020 promoted the status of the Russian language as “the language of the state-forming nation” (kremlin.ru 2018b; Gosudarstvennaya дума 2020). There is a considerable degree of ambiguity embedded in what the role of the “state-forming people” or the unifying Russian culture means in practice.

Hence, the boundaries of “Russianness”, at least in ethnic terms, remain vague in the state discourse. Instead, the nation is described in different terms: the state leadership emphasises the values, tradition, and spiritual legacy of “Russianness”. The boundaries of the nation are thus more of a “mental” or

“moral” character, as opposed to being based on ethnicity or even institutional membership, like citizenship. Publications III and IV show that the state leadership has reverted to emphasising traditional values as a historically uniting feature of the nation. Moreover, the shared past figures strongly in the president’s parlance on the nation: remembering and respecting the memory of past generations’ heroic deeds is depicted as a moral responsibility of today’s generation. The presidential discourse portrays Russia as being under an external threat, which is reflected in the rhetoric that draws parallels between wars in the past and the present. According to the president, the Russian state needs and is prepared to defend not only the traditional values of the Russian nation but also the “correct” interpretations of the national past. From the perspective of belonging, it is worth stressing that the presidential discourse produces language in which the nation is a unified whole – or in Freedén’s (2005, 209) terms, both holistic and homogeneous. When all Russians are depicted as subscribing to the set of conservative values, Russians who do not embrace these values are rhetorically excluded from the nation. In this way, as noted in publication IV, the state authorities uphold the rhetoric of a unified nation by simultaneously creating and preserving divisive lines *within* society.

At the level of argumentation, the state leadership “borrows ingredients” from the conservative tradition and, in doing so, it also reinforces the essentialist interpretation of the past as a path on which the nation proceeds. In this way, the nationalist argument of the state leadership marks the place of Russia in time and space. Temporally, it positions the Russian state and nation as continuing a “thousand-year-long” tradition, but it also defines Russia’s place in the world. In this sense, the nationalist argument of the state also has a foreign policy aspect. The idea of Russia under threat is combined with the idea of borders of “Russianness” being wider than the state borders would suggest: the “mental” Russia is bigger than the state in its current form. And yet it is indeed the current Russian state that carries itself as a force defending the traditional, spiritual values in the world. In conclusion, it can be stated that according to the nationalist argument of the Russian state leadership, the boundaries of “Russianness” are both more restricted and more encompassing than the current borders of the Russian Federation: they are more restricted given that not everyone living in Russia belongs to the nation in a “proper” way because they subscribe to “foreign” ideas and values instead of the traditional, Russian ones. However, there are people living outside of the borders of the Russian state who can be affiliated with “Russianness” because they share these values and are therefore regarded by Russia as “ours”.

With the political system developing in a more ideological and authoritarian direction, the state leadership’s definition of the boundaries of “Russianness” remains the one framing and conditioning the sphere of actual politics. For example, adopting words like “foreign” and “non-traditional” to

characterise undesired activities in recent legislation²⁹ shows that nationalist languages have very real and palpable implications in society. Moreover, with legislation that functions as a deterrent towards liberal or critical stances, deeming them “unpatriotic” or foreign to Russia, certain views become impossible to express in public. On the one hand, this means fewer chances for other actors to publicly challenge the basis of the state leadership’s nationalist argument on the unified nation. But, on the other hand, this tendency pushes certain sensitive topics – like those related to ethnic tensions – to the margins of society and outside the public debate, which hampers the state leadership’s ability to follow the latent attitudes of society.

In this context, it is important to note that, as mentioned in publication I (p. 235), the ethnonationalist and xenophobic attitudes “have not lost their popular appeal forever”. Indeed, the decline in these sentiments in 2014 proved temporary, with negative attitudes towards migrants as well as some specific nationalities rising again after 2017 (Mukhametshina 2019; Levada 2020). To a certain extent, attitudes towards migration in the contemporary Russian context indicate popular perceptions of the boundaries of the nation: people from the republics of North Caucasus are seen as “the Other” in relation to “Russians”, when “their” presence among “us” raises resistance. As these aspects are not addressed in the state leadership’s rhetoric concerning the boundaries of “Russianness”, the interethnic tensions, anti-migrant sentiments, and everyday racism will remain contentious topics vis-à-vis the state nationalist argument in the future, especially if the ethno-nationalist sentiment intensifies. This is not to say that those topics would be of great importance to the majority of people, nor that many Russians would support narrow ethnonationalist views. However, if the trend continues, the state leadership may start sensing that it should include this aspect in its nationalist argument.

Thus, in formulating the nationalist argument, the state leadership’s discourse has maintained distance from the oppositional nationalists’ anti-migration message as well as from the radical neoconservative nationalists’ demands, but as they all develop over time, the contention over the concepts and framing of the nation will prevail.

Nationalist argument contested: nationalism and state legitimacy

Since the annexation of Crimea in particular, interpretations of nationalism as a tool in the hands of the Russian political leadership have gained ground. Indeed, the “Crimean consensus” faded division lines within society for some time, but I would lean on the interpretation presented by Henry Hale et al.

²⁹ I refer here specifically to the laws and amendments on “foreign agents” (*inostrannye agenty*) as well as the laws on “non-traditional” (*netraditsionnaya*) sexual orientation or religious movements.

(2019, 189) that, from the perspective of the Russian state leadership, the manoeuvre took place in the context of the regime's "ideational improvisation" – instead of a fundamental ethno-national turn in its policies. Nevertheless, state nationalism in contemporary Russia is intrinsically connected to the idea of domestic legitimacy, which often motivates the foreign policy decisions.

In the context of state-society relations in post-Soviet Russia, the concept of a social contract is crucial. Instead of the widespread definition of the social contract simply meaning the loyalty of citizens in return for the stability of the state, Aleksei Makarkin (2011, 1460–1461) suggests that the social contract in Russia is based predominantly on socio-economic factors. In his view, the state guarantees the majority of people a reasonable quality of life; pays pensions and salaries; and enables the people to plan their future. Only if the state fails to fulfil its part of the social contract do "politics proper" become relevant. In 2011–2012, the contract was put to the test when Russian people gathered to protest against Vladimir Putin's plans to return as president after Dmitri Medvedev's era. The state authorities' reaction to limit the possibilities of political contention in 2012 did not change the basic outline of the social contract, but rather demonstrated that the stability of the country was to be secured by increasing authoritarian control.

At the same time, as shown in publications III and IV, the rhetoric on traditional "spiritual-moral values" and the external threat intensified in the presidential discourse during the 2010s. In this sense, the state authorities sought support from the conservative part of society, which they perceive as the majority and thus the critical base of the social contract. When analysing the change in discourses in the early 2010s, it seems that the turn away from "common European values" towards the "distinctively Russian" values was relatively swift. Publication III argues that a turn "back" could have been possible earlier if it had been deemed appropriate by the state leadership, but after the constitutional amendments in 2020, this seems out of the question. The new "ideological" emphasis has been written into the key legislation of the Russian state, which may reduce the chances of "recalibrating" its ideational base (Hale et al. 2019, 171) under the current leadership. It remains to be seen what practical consequences the new Constitution will bring about, but it is already clear that the laws that have been rewritten on the basis of the new Constitution strengthen the isolative, authoritarian and conservative line of politics.³⁰ Moreover, the process confirmed that instead of adjusting the contents of the nationalist argumentation in a conciliatory direction, the state

³⁰ In summer 2020, President Putin stated that "the entire legislative framework of the country" needed to be developed in order to "fully comply" with the new Constitution (Interfax 2020). In the latter half of 2020, this reasoning was used to introduce a widening of the scope of the "foreign agent" law to individuals and granting former presidents lifetime immunity from prosecution, among other things (Makutina 2020; Zamakhina 2020).

authorities wanted to expand the ideologically charged rhetoric to the legislative sphere of the country.

The annexation of Crimea marked a watershed in Russia's foreign policy behaviour – even though it followed an ideational trajectory that had already been adopted years earlier in respect of Russia's "true" and justified borders being wider than the current ones. The annexation in 2014 and the subsequent surge in national pride led to scholarly interpretations of a new social contract: in this view, the people were given a "boost" of nationalist great-poweriness in exchange for loyalty to the state in a time of crisis. Magnus Feldmann and Honarata Mazepus (2018, 69–72) note that the explanations leaning solely on nationalist claims replacing the earlier "outputs" of the social contract fall short in understanding the change that the Crimean annexation created in Russia, and that they have much to do with political culture as well. Indeed, the social contract should be understood as dynamic by nature in that it can be re-negotiated, but the process of "re-negotiating" has not ended in Russia.

Thus, as noted in publication IV, the "Crimean consensus" did not resolve the challenges related to state legitimacy, even though this was most likely one of the important reasons why it was conducted. The action manifested Russia's assertive foreign policy and the state leadership's willingness and ability to force changes in state borders abroad, against the international agreements they had committed to. Despite the fact that the majority of Russians perceived the annexation of Crimea in a very positive light – and that the percentages of these attitudes have not changed significantly since then³¹ – the domestic "utility" of nationalism should not be exaggerated (March 2018, 85). More importantly, the support for the annexation of Crimea is insufficient evidence to conclude that the Russian people would support any other interpretation of the nation produced by the state. As publication II in this dissertation confirms, the views connected to nationalism – among those who use the concept for self-description – were not congruent with the views expressed by the president.

Moreover, recent years have provided evidence against the instrumentalist readings of nationalism as the optimistic enthusiasm related to the annexation of Crimea, still palpable in 2014–2015, has faded (Hale et al. 2019, 192). Shortly after the annexation, Emil Pain and Lev Gudkov (2014, 73) were quick to discuss the potential durability of the nationalist boost, suggesting that it might function as a supportive factor for the regime for some years to come, and agreeing that the trend would slowly decrease. Adopting assertive foreign policy manoeuvres in order to enhance domestic legitimacy is not only a highly risky and costly strategy, it may also be temporary.

³¹ In a Levada Center poll conducted in March 2019, 86 per cent of respondents supported the annexation (in March 2014, the figure was 88%). Sixty-five per cent of the respondents were of the opinion that the annexation had, as a whole, benefitted Russia (Levada 2019).

As Luke March (2018, 79) puts it, the approaches that deem nationalism a mere “driver” of foreign policy remain simplistic and contentious. But nor should the annexation of Crimea be taken as “proof” of nationalism within the state apparatus: it should, rather, be seen as one part of the ideational improvisation of the regime. The language used to justify the annexation indeed played with the ideas of “proper” borders of the nation: in Putin’s rhetoric, the move was needed in order to protect the rights of “our people” living in the area (kremlin.ru 2014b). In this sense, the nationalist argument of the state stretched the idea of “Russianness”, but there is no reason to expect that it was exactly this aspect of the annexation that gained support in the eyes of the people. The great powerness (*derzhavnost*) and the “return” of Russia’s international influence was similarly welcomed by the people, but the support may derive from sources other than “ethno-nationalism” among the Russian people. For example, even though the majority of Russians after 2014 agreed with the statement that Russia is a great power, the most popular feature of a great power was considered to be the well-being of its citizens (Levada 2016).

In general, the nationalist argument based on the idea of conservative-traditional values shared by all Russians is problematic because it assumes a unity that does not exist in society. In this sense, the nationalist argument of the state leadership, in its current or any form, is not “enough” to secure the legitimacy of the regime, which is why, for the time being, the state authorities have chosen to lean increasingly on deterrents and repressive measures against contentious forces in politics. The repressive measures, however, rely heavily on the logic of the boundaries of “Russianness” that the state leadership produces in its discourse: the dissentful activities are portrayed as either “foreign”, unpatriotic, or as a threat to national security.

In the future, the legitimacy of the current Russian state leadership will remain a key question guiding the country’s development. Returning to Aleksei Makarkin’s definition, the socio-economic challenges that the increasingly authoritarian (and “ideological”) state should be able to overcome in order to fulfil the social contract have not eased during the past decade – in many respects, they have become even more acute. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the prospects of economic growth were modest at best, and with the new situation, hopes of a quick recovery have been shattered. Thus, the various socio-economic grievances among the people prevail.

In addition, the state leadership will face challenges stemming from the ongoing tensions and unpredictability in international politics. Since the mid-2000s, Russia’s political leadership has created and maintained narratives of malicious foreign influence. As shown in publication III, during the 2010s, the presidential discourse portrayed Russia’s traditional values as being fundamentally different from those possessed by Russia’s “Others”. The common European roots of Russian values were gradually replaced by the discourse that “the West” has abandoned the true Christian morals, something that Russia holds dear and defends – an idea that has been worked within various currents of Russian conservative thought since the early Slavophiles in

the 1830s, and has now been reinforced in the post-Cold War context. At the same time, the rhetoric of an external threat, essential for the conservative worldview, has been developed more explicitly in the presidential discourse.

The publications in this dissertation, underpinned by the literature cited above, add nuances to the scholarly discussion on nationalism in Russia by showing how uncertain nationalist claims can be a source of legitimacy from the point of view of the regime. First, the nationalist argument developed by the Russian state builds upon the homogeneity of the people in their acceptance of the traditional-conservative emphasis. However, the sentiments of society are not necessarily as conservative or unified as the state discourses assume.

Second, with the repressive and authoritarian policies that restrict the views expressed in the media and public debate and suppress any real political contention, the state leadership risks creating an echo chamber that complicates formulating the nationalist argument according to the popular moods when indications of those moods are no longer visible to them. In addition, the decision to adjust the repressive legislation to follow the nationalist-conservative language may limit the flexibility of the nationalist argument at the state actor's disposal. Even if the state leadership were to recognise the need to redefine the nationalist argument, the changes should be moderate enough to still be congruent with the key narratives on the nation, consolidated and bound together during the past decade. Moreover, any possible changes should be placed within the ideologically oriented legislative framework. Thus, any substantial re-directing in this sense seems less likely under the current regime.

However, it needs to be noted that this conclusion is tentative, considering that the legislation, or even the Constitution, is not necessarily respected by the authoritarian state leadership. The previous, notably liberal text of the Constitution was formulated in 1993 and remained unchanged until 2020 when its ideals had diverged very far from the political reality of the country. This did not prevent the political leadership from acting against the spirit of the Constitution, which would suggest that the new, internally incoherent Constitution, combining liberal principles with ideologically oriented ones, will not restrict the political leadership in any significant way. Moreover, the political elite of an authoritarian country should not be understood as monolithic. Even if the disagreements within the state apparatus are not always visible, they may nevertheless exist, which potentially creates conflicts within the state leadership.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the state discourse on traditional values says nothing about the commitment to those values within the state leadership, which undermines the credibility of the argument. As publication IV argues, the state authorities have struggled with answering accusations of corruption committed by state officials. The state leaders who portray "placing

spiritual over material” as part of the shared value basis of the nation (but whose obscure ownerships were reported in the media) have been an easy target for the protesters who have gathered on the streets since 2017 to protest against corruption. The socio-economic challenges as well as the worsening situation with the Covid-19 pandemic in the Russian regions in particular may contribute to this erosion of credibility. While the state nationalist argument has addressed shared experiences of resentment and humiliation in the foreign policy context, there is no reason to assume that those experiences among the people could not rise from the domestic sphere, and be directed against the political elite of the country.

Thus, I would maintain that nationalism in the context of legitimacy – in contemporary Russia, and perhaps in general – cannot be exhaustively explained as an instrument. The view of nationalism as something that can be “utilised” treats both the “user” and the “recipient” of the instrument, as well as the power relationship between them, in a simplistic manner. Instead, nationalism is better understood as an argument alongside other, similar competing arguments. In light of its contested nature, the nationalist argument continues to be re-formulated and defended.

8 CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation, several interlinked questions related to nationalism as an argument in contemporary Russian politics have been posed. The four publications as well as this introductory part advance the point that nationalism remains a contested concept not only empirically but also analytically when scholars apply it in different ways within and across research disciplines. The disagreements over the meanings of nationalism, as well as the qualitative gap between the way it is applied in everyday and scholarly language, provide a fruitful yet challenging research niche. Any attempt to define nationalism in an exhaustive manner, so that all of its elements could be addressed, inevitably fails. Instead, the meanings, contexts and value orientations of the concept are best grasped by analysing how it is applied.

Yet, as has been shown in the previous research literature, the complex relationship between the concept of nationalism and the word itself creates empirical and analytical challenges. The nationalist argument is often formulated, re-formulated and defended without using the word at all due to the persistent negative connotations of the term in public speech. In the Russian context, the word has acquired derogatory meanings over the centuries. In the Russian empire, the concept was long shunned and censored because of its liberal connotations stressing national representation. At the turn of the century, the view of nationalities as entities forming the empire grew stronger, and the concept's meanings became related to separatism. After the October Revolution, the view of nationalities as (political) entities became institutionalised in the affirmative action policy of the Soviet Union in the 1920s, but the concept of nationalism became even more charged as it started to signify an antipode to the Communist ideal of internationalism. The dissident nationalism(s) developed the Slavophile ideas further from the 1960s onwards, and their legacy is apparent in the language of today's national-conservatives. Experiences of national conflicts in the late 1980s and the fear of separatism that pervaded the early years of independent Russia have added new elements to the concept. In the 2000s, extreme forms of nationalism such as the skinhead movement enhanced the connection of nationalism to violent "hooliganism".

In present-day Russia, therefore, the concept's negative connotations have multiple sources. The concept is influenced, however, not only by the legacy of past language, but also by the ways in which the past is represented in the present. In this way, the dissertation suggests that nationalist language in Russia is also currently undergoing change. Over the past decade, the challenge posed to the state authorities on the part of radical oppositional nationalists has decreased but not disappeared. At the same time, some of the

views of radical conservative nationalists have been adopted into the political mainstream as the state nationalist argument borrowed their “civilisational” ideas of Russia’s position in the world. Both in the camp of “dissentful” and “consentful” nationalist actors, the concept of nationalism is used differently from the way it is used in the state discourse. Moreover, the views related to nationalism are highly diverse even among those who describe themselves as nationalists. The state leadership, for its part, has begun to emphasise conservative values as a shared feature of the nation, and reorganised federal legislation accordingly. In this way, the intensified authoritarianism has silenced public debate on sensitive topics related to nationalism, which may distance the state nationalist argument further from everyday understandings of the concept.

It is in this context that the Russian president has described himself as “the biggest nationalist in the country”, adding that he has 146 million like-minded nationalists – referring to the whole population of Russia. The statement underlines how the state leadership portrays the nation as a unified whole, which, in reality, it cannot be. Yet it also manifests a conceptual evolution of nationalism in the self-descriptive use that may well be occurring elsewhere in the world as well. For example, in 2018, Donald Trump differentiated nationalists – such as himself – from “globalists”, suggesting that the latter group did not care about “our country”, and attached greater importance to the “globe” instead. The key question therefore remains: Do these self-descriptions signal, or even facilitate, a change by which nationalism is becoming a more accepted “ism” globally? The self-descriptive cases appear to be conceptual innovations that have not reached (thus far) a commonsensical position in the language of the society. Yet I suggest that they should be taken seriously: conceptual change may take place through the unexpected uses of an existing concept. Nationalism, and nationalist, despite being invective, have the potential to become accepted and even transnational in the sense that conservative nationalists perceive nationalism as a positive feature – its country of origin notwithstanding.

As often happens in research, the publications in this dissertation have answered important questions but also raised new ones. In particular, two themes related to the overall research problem remain to be further studied in the future: the contestation *within* the Russian state structures regarding the boundaries of the nation, and the regional diversity of the nationalist argumentation. The publications, as well as this introduction, view nationalism in Russia as a diverse phenomenon that does not have a singular voice. In society, and regarding the various nationalist movements, the approach seems rather intuitive, but the authoritarian and heavily president-centred state system creates an image of unity within the state apparatus.

All of the publications in this dissertation mention the discrepancy between the primacy of Russian culture, language and ethnicity, on the one hand, and

the historical multinationality of the nation, on the other – both endorsed in the official language. The nationalist argument of the Russian state leadership has been analysed on the basis of the president's speeches, as the president is the highest figure expressing state power in public. Reflecting the presidential discourse against the output of other key actors on nationality issues could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the disagreements within the policy-making sphere. There are certain signals suggesting that the state authorities' views on the "proper" boundaries of the Russian nation may diverge: Publication IV mentions the seemingly civic definition of the Russian nation that was included in the Strategy of Nationalities Policy in December 2018, and yet the Constitution, amended in 2020, explicitly reinforces the status of the Russian language. What process led to these decisions, and how would the contestation be characterised from the perspective of conceptual change?

Moreover, juxtaposing the views on the "Russianness" of the federal authorities with those of the representatives of the regional-level administration, for example by conducting interviews, could be a valuable contribution in studying the Russian state apparatus. The regional aspect has been absent from the research questions in this dissertation. Publication II, where regional newspapers were included, touches upon titular nationalism and how "nationalist" as a concept was applied in those contexts, and a further study focusing solely on these aspects in specific regional media outlets, for example, would help diversify the views on the nationalist argumentation in contemporary Russia.

As argued in the previous chapter, nationalism as an instrument is unreliable in the hands of a political leader; it should rather be perceived as an argument or claim, prone to continuous contestation. Nationalism as such is socially constructed, but conscious political processes to construct a nation along desired lines rarely succeed in becoming "common sense" – and even then the process appears slow and partial. In the case of contemporary Russia, the nationalist argument of the state leadership whereby the "proper" borders of the nation are at the same time wider and more restricted than the state borders, based on the acceptance of traditional Russian values, cannot be said to have "won" the contestation over nationalism. The state leadership has translated this interpretation into repressive domestic policies that thwart any political challenge to it, but with time, the resentment that has previously fuelled support for the nationalist argument may become re-directed. Thus, the boundaries of the nation – mental or political – are not written in stone, and the nationalist contention in Russia will continue. In analysing the future forms that this contention will take, the dissertation argues for understanding nationalism as a temporal, powerful and omnipresent argument.

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This dissertation analyses the uses of the concept of nationalism in Russia from a historical perspective. It is based on four empirical studies examining textual material produced between the years 2000 and 2020. During this time, the state leadership in Russia adopted increasingly authoritarian policies vis-à-vis society, and started to portray Russia as being under an external threat. The annexation of Crimea and the onset of the war in Ukraine in 2014 solidified the way in which recent political changes in Russia were characterised as “growing nationalism”.

In this temporal context, the study suggests that nationalist discourses are currently shifting, and traces these shifts in scholarly and everyday language. The aspects of nationalism as an analytical concept, as well as the complex relationship between the concept and the term itself, are expounded in the study.

Following the tradition of critical nationalism studies, the dissertation approaches the ‘nation’ as a political claim that results from a constructive process in language. The dissertation draws on the rhetorical tradition of conceptual history in analysing specific concepts, metaphors and narratives within nationalist discourses as a means of framing politics. The rhetorical choices of politicians map the conditions of belonging to a nation, duly having real implications for people’s lives.

Veera Laine is a graduate of the University of Helsinki, Doctoral Program in Political, Societal and Regional Change. This PhD study was submitted in the field of Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki in 2021.

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