

Russian Post-Nationalism or Pan-Ethnicity? The Case of Compatriots in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Crimea*

Sertan Akbaba**

Kırşehir Ahi Evran University

Abstract

A significant number of individuals are living in Russia, as well as in the neighboring countries that have strong links to Russian identity. Whether they are called *Russky*, *Rossiyanin* or neither, they tend to be referred to as *Russophiles* or *Russophones*. This raises several questions, including, in the realm of identity politics, that of how one can evaluate the recent actions of the Russian Federation regarding the Georgian and Crimean crises. Is their aim to secure pre-existing bonds, provoke a national reaction, or make a strategically driven post-national move? This analysis supports the latter hypothesis, i.e., that Russian policy is being dominated by geopolitical interests, rather than by ethnic concerns. Recent Russian foreign policy is evaluated through a post-national lens within a wider community of ethnographic diversity, drawing evidence from the Compatriot policy of the Russian Federation with a focus on the Compatriots in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Crimea.

Keywords: Russo-centrism, Russian nationalism, ethnicity, identity politics, post-nationalism

Rus Post-Milliyetçiliği Yahut Pan-Etnisizmi? Güney Osetya, Abhazya ve Kırım'daki Yurttaşlık Durumu

Özet

Rus kimliği ile yakından ilintili olarak Rusya toprakları içinde ve yakın çevresinde önemli sayıda insan topluluğu yaşamaktadır. Bu insanlar *Russky*, *Rossiyanin*, *Russophile* veya *Russophone* olarak tanımlanmaktadırlar. Güncel gelişmeler ışığında Rusya'nın yürüttüğü faaliyetlerin önceden var olan kimlik bağlarını korumak adına mı, yoksa bu bağları araçsallaştırıp, stratejik bir takım ihtiyaçları karşılamak adına mı gerçekleştirdiği hususu önem kazanmaktadır. Bu sorular ışığında, hâlihazırdaki gelişmeler milliyetçi bir reaksiyon mu yoksa post-milliyetçi stratejik bir hamle olarak mı okunmalıdır? Çalışma ikinci görüşü savunmakla beraber Rusya'nın izlediği siyasetin Slav kimliği odaklı etnik bir temel yerine jeopolitik çıkarlarının etrafında şekillenen post-milliyetçi bir yaklaşım

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** Sertan Akbaba is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Relations at Kırşehir Ahi Evran University, Bağbaşı Mah. No: 100, Kırşehir, Turkey. E-mail: sertan.akbaba@ahievran.edu.tr

ile açıklanması gereğini gösterir. Makale Rusya'nın yakın çevresinde izlediği siyaseti etnografik çeşitliliği içinde barındıran geniş ölçekli bir kimlik tartışması üzerinden ve post-milliyetçi bir bakış açısıyla ele almaktadır. Bu analiz ışığında Rusya'nın yürüttüğü yurttaşlık politikasını ise Güney Osetya, Abhazya ve Kırım mukayesesi üzerinden analiz etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya merkezcilik, Rus milliyetçiliği, etnisite, kimlik siyaseti, post-milliyetçilik

The post-Cold War era has witnessed the emergence of identity politics. On the one hand, this has resulted in the revival of sub-identities—ethnic, cultural, and lingual—making them more significant than ever before. On the other, it has affected the way in which nation-states respond to such movements. In responding to such claims, the nation-state is not in denial as was previously often the case, and can certainly no longer be ignored. The nation-state is striving for common ground as well as reconciliation among the identities of its residents, thus moving towards post-national agendas, which is a phenomenon that is mostly covered by studies conducted in the West by Western authors. However, the aim of this study is to examine whether it has any projections in the east, namely the Russian Federation. The current developments in Russia's neighboring territories, namely South Ossetia, Abkhazia and the recent annexation of Crimea, open up a debate that can provide some empirical evidence on post-nationalism. Most scholars^[1] evaluate the recent developments in regions in close proximity to Russia as a reflection of an *aggressive* or an *assertive* type of nationalism. Yet, for others, due to the Kremlin's pragmatism, this move is referred to as *pragmatic nationalism* (Flenley 2005) or *imperial nationalism* (Pain, 2016). However, as argued in this paper, the recent politics pursued by the Kremlin are more closely related to a strategically as well as instrumentally driven post-national move. This paper posits this argument on the assumption that Russian 'language' and 'culture' are re-located as political and economic resources rather than ethnic ones. It is important to emphasize that state policies for securing or fulfilling 'national interests' are completely different from a state pursuing 'nationalism' both within and outside of state territory. In the Russian case, this national interest focuses on the diversified Russian population residing outside the Russian Federation, which is an important focus of Moscow's policy towards its immediate neighbors.

The current debate primarily pertains to whether Russian identification will be strengthened via a non-ethnic, inclusive and civic *Rossiyanin* furthered via post-nationalism (Laruelle 2015) or an ethnically motivated *Russky* that would eventually lead to a pan-ethnic (pan-Slavic) formation (Shevel 2011). The arguments put forth in this paper support the former view. Moreover, the analyses are performed based on a non-ethnic

[1] See, Walter D. Connor, "A Russia That Can Say No?" *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 40, No:3, 2007, pp. 383-391. Andrei Tsygankov. "From Belgrade to Kiev Hard-line Nationalism and Russia's Foreign Policy," in *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia*, ed. Marlene Laruelle, (Abingdon, England: Routledge 2009), pp. 189-202. Galina Kozhevnikova. "Manifestations of Radical Nationalism And Efforts to Counteract it in Russia during the First Half of 2010," SOVA Center, July 30 2010, URL: <http://www.sova-center.ru/en/xenophobia/reports-analyses/2010/07/d19436/>

model of post-national citizenship, namely the Compatriot policy of Moscow, attached strictly to the polity (namely statehood), rather than establishing an ethnically oriented alternative. Thus, in order to avoid any misunderstandings, there is a need to define how the concepts studied in this paper are acknowledged. To clarify the position taken in the analyses presented here, the concepts of ethnic, national, pan-ethnic and post-national identification require working definitions. The term ‘ethnic identification’ rests on the self-identification of an individual with an ethnic group he/she believes in as well as feels a belonging to. The term ‘national identity’ is evaluated here as a self-identification within a fixed boundary, and implies the sharing of certain rights/responsibilities with co-nationals. Pan-ethnic identification encompasses the Eastern Slavic people, who live in the geographic region of today’s Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia. These people are viewed as forming a group of “brotherly peoples” (Shevel 2011:179-202). This requires an identification within a (historically) fixed boundary, namely ‘Holy Russia.’ The concept Holy Russia emphasizes an ethnic core, namely the Slavs, while excluding other groups within this context. This would destabilize the heterogeneous form of the Russian Federation. However, post-national identification is, in this context, equated with the boundary-free identification of the Russian people, irrespective of their attachments (cultural, historical, or linguistic) and whether they live within or outside of the Russian Federation, encapsulating namely the Russian World/Community (*Russkiy Mir*). Thus, in an era of *post-mass nationalism*,^[2] it is evident that Russia does not aim to establish a monotypic nation, or a pan-ethnic state, resting solely on an ethnic origin or at least one to be created. Post-nationalism is not used here as an antonym of nationalism, but is rather evaluated as an attachment to the Russian polity. In other words, it is seen as a way of strengthening the bond between the individual and the state rather than a pure national zeal for creating a homogenous Russian identity.

In light of this debate, it is the goal of this work to elucidate how nationalism falls short in defining the policies of the Russian State, as an outcome of the re-territorialization of the country, and the inclusive multi-ethnic character of the Russian Federation. In the theoretical realm, when analyzing nationalism, the study of John Breuilly^[3] is taken into consideration. His contribution is particularly valuable in this context, as it elucidates how nationalism has come to be used for legitimizing the state for receiving power, contributing to the coordination of state institutions, and finally mobilizing the masses around the interests produced by state elites for fulfilling their own goals. This assump-

^[2] *Post-mass Nationalism* is used here in similarity to *Post-Nationalism* as “a reflection of national identity cannot be adhered to the whole nation, as although attached to a nation, the individual is not willing to become politically active in the name of his/her nation.” See E. B. Haas, *Nationalism, Liberalism and Progress: The Rise and Decline of Nationalism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). As a result, nationalism is not acknowledged as the actions or attitudes of a (monolith) nation, but the attitudes or actions of different competing groups. See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

^[3] Breuilly’s contribution on nationalism is considered more as an approach for the study of nationalism and less as a theory. Breuilly treats nationalism as “a form of politics and creates a typology of nationalist politics and then uses the method of comparative history to study particular cases. Nationalism is best understood as an especially appropriate form of political behavior in the context of the modern state and the modern state system.” John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, (2nd edition), (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.1.

tion clearly reflects the political behavior of United Russia (UR) as a ‘party of power,’ established by state elites trying to maintain their power. Once its theoretical framework is delineated, the study draws upon the Compatriot policy of Russia in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Crimea. For this purpose, the current Georgian and Crimean crises are discussed, based on the premise that the Kremlin is attempting to restore the strength and status of Russian political grace. However, this is done not in a ‘national’ but in a ‘post-national’ political framework, with the goal of expanding its inclusive policy for the wellbeing of Compatriots, alongside its strategic needs in the Russian peninsula.

The Questioning of National Identification

Any study related to nationalism comes to be contested. Early debates on nationalism witnessed the confrontation between primordialism and modernism. However, since the turn of the twenty-first century, this question has prompted both modern and post-modern debates. A group of modernist scholars^[4] argue that both nations and nationalism appear to be in a discontinuity, which requires a decision on what should be confronted next. It is clear that “more and more present-day scholars of nationalism accept that there is a wide spectrum of explanations for the formation of nations, at different times and places, and that no one theory can cover all cases” (Smith 1998:1). In the modern globalized world, it is becoming increasingly difficult to locate the term *nation*.^[5] As a result, studying *nationalism*^[6] has become even more complex. According to Triandafyllidou,

Nationalism and, indeed, the nation itself appear in an ever-greater diversity of forms and configurations, changing and constantly reinventing the phenomena that scholars have meticulously tried to fit into analytical categories. However, even though no definition may appear completely satisfactory given the complexity and multidimensionality of national identity, a working definition is necessary for constructing a theoretical framework. (2001:12)

In light of the aforementioned argument, it is not surprising that literature on theorizing nationalism is abundant; however, Breuilly’s work is unique in that he perceives nationalism as a form of politics, and thus requires further exploration. Breuilly, for

^[4] See, Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, (USA: Blackwell Publishing, 1983), Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (2nd Edition) (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992). John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, (2nd Edition) (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

^[5] For instance, “Enoch Powell recognizes that his usage of the term ‘nation’ is idiosyncratic. Not all cultural, religious, or ethnic communities are ‘nations’ in his strict sense of the term, because not all of these communities are willing to accept rule by a single unitary sovereign.” See Glyn Morgan, *The Idea of a European Superstate: Public Justification and European Integration*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p.60.

^[6] There is a growing body of literature on the problematic of nationalism(s). It is clear that many circumstances cause nationalism and as a result, nationalism has many ambitions. Therefore, there are “...distinctions between ‘territorial’ and ‘diaspora’ nationalism; ‘modernization’ or ‘reform’ nationalism and ‘conservative’ nationalism; ‘unification’ and ‘separatist’ nationalism; ‘nation-building’ or ‘state’ nationalism and ‘sub-national’, ‘anti-colonial’, or ‘post-imperial’ nationalisms; ‘official’ and ‘insurgent’ nationalism; ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ nationalism; or between ‘state-framed’ and ‘counter-state’ nationalism. One study listed thirty-nine types of nationalism.” See Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism*, (London: Duckworth, 1983), p.211–29.

example, posits that linking nationalism to the modern state is an outcome of modernity, whereby society's perception has become more closely related to the *market* or the *state*, rather than to the *nation* (Breuille 1994:270). For Breuille, nationalism "is best understood as an especially appropriate form of political behavior in the context of the modern state..." (1994:1). Breuille evaluates nationalism as a form of politics; for him, "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" (1994:1). At this point, it is important to stress the presence of the UR, the party in office in Russia, with its leading figure Vladimir Putin. Putin seeks to fuse policies from both the left and the right in a centrist position, as the party lacks a clear ideological profile. This is the foremost reason why Putin refrains from a nationalist rhetoric, preferring patriotism instead.

According to Breuille, in order to secure the needs of and control the direction for protecting the state, "nationalism is used to refer to political units seeking or exercising state power and justifying such action with nationalist arguments" (1994:1). The establishment of institutions and the public-private distinction require the participation of citizens. Through this participation, the goal is to bind the individual to the state, i.e., make the state-individual connection. Breuille speaks of "a harmony between the public interests of citizens and the private interests of selfish individuals" (1994:165), namely the *elites*. In fulfilling this aim, the goal is to construct the tie between the state and society, and subsequently secure it in the name of framing individuals. This goal is pursued as a means of establishing the state-society connection, and creating a polity of citizens. For Breuille, "it is the political rights, not the cultural identities of those who are citizens" (1994:165) making up the modern nation. It is 'the body of citizens' which Breuille explains as "the notion of freedom as privacy beyond the state by defining freedom solely as participation in the implementation of the general will" (1994:165). According to Breuille, "a nationalist movement may ignore nationalist intellectuals and may also include non-nationalist values, rather than nationalist propaganda" (1884:163). Breuille further notes:

Nations are not deeply rooted in history, but are notable consequences of the revolution that constituted modernity and as such tied to their features and conditions, with the result that once these features and conditions are transformed, nations would gradually wither away and be superseded. (1994:21-2)

For Breuille, the changes and transformations brought along with modernity are mostly in the economic realm. Referring to market relationships, it is a way to break down local isolation and those controlling it. By taking this direction, entry for external political groups is made possible, while the locals are given the opportunity to turn their attention outwards. Nationalism will, therefore, be understood "neither as an expression of some enduring reality such as the nation nor as an arbitrary ideological construction, but rather as one response to certain crucial aspects of modernity" (1994:140). That is why the UR and its foremost leader Vladimir Putin seek to repatriate the Compatriots as well as to legitimize the Russian World for the sake of the Russian state, ruling via

a post-national thinking and subordinating the society in favor of glorifying the state. This study argues that the Kremlin uses *state nationalism* as a political shield at certain times to fulfill certain interests, as well as to consolidate the people around that cause. This brings the focus onto what Breuilly argues is a significant conceptual problem of “identifying state nationalism, nationalist governments whose policies defend national interests which other states might regard as assertive or aggressive...” (1994:10-1). That is why the analyses presented in this paper are grounded in the assumption that the recent actions of Russia are primarily dominated by economic matters that affect Russia’s identity politics, and are motivated by a post-national agenda, rather than an aggressive type of nationalism beyond its borders that tries to impose a uniform identity upon neighboring peoples.

The Russian People: Post-National Identification?

It is important to emphasize that in the Russian Constitution (1993), the people are defined as the “multi-national people of Russia” (The Russian Constitution Article 3). In addition, in the political discourse, the term ‘Russian people’ (*narod*), rather than nation (*natsiya*), is used for characterizing the civic and pluralistic nature of the Russians. For instance, according to the Russian Constitution “everyone shall have the right to determine and declare his/her nationality. Nobody shall be forced to determine and declare his/her nationality...” (The Russian Constitution Article 26). At this juncture, it is important to stress that 170 ethnic groups presently reside in Russia, according to the All Russian Census (2010). Starting from the Yeltsin era, and later followed by Putin, it is important to stress the frequent use of the concept ‘Russian people’ rather than the ‘Russian nation.’ Throughout the past, whether during the Tsarist or Soviet era, ethnic groups were not divided in terms of their identities. More importantly, their differences were rendered politically irrelevant by uniting them into a post-national ‘Soviet’ people. It is clear that ‘Russian-ness’ as a concept has neither in the past nor today ever come to be defined in terms of ethnic origin, but rather through loyalty to the state (Molozov 2008), what Breuilly defines as the “polity of Citizens” (1994:165). For instance, Vladimir Putin calls himself a ‘patriot’ rather than a ‘nationalist,’ thus avoiding any negative connotation of nationalism and ensuring that this label does not harm the multiethnic and pluralistic character of the Russian people. Woo is right to define the elites in the Kremlin who “dislike ideology and appeal to patriotism, convinced that Russia must accept the cultural boundaries that history and fate has assigned her” (Woo 2002:97-8). For instance, the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), Gennady Zyuganov (2014) addresses this idea with “Ukraine is not just part of the Slavic world. The Ukrainian land and its people are [an] integral part of the Russian consciousness, of Russian history.” This boundary is not limited to today’s Russian territory and clearly extends to its near geography. Within the realm of this territory, Moscow seems to favor fluid boundaries, perceiving the link between territory and membership as distinct from multiple status. As clearly declared in the Russian Constitution, “the Russian Federation shall consist of republics, territories, regions, federal cities, an autonomous region and autonomous areas, which shall

be equal subjects of the Russian Federation” (The Russian Constitution Article 5). The federal character of Russia with its multiple locations—whether this is a region, republic or city—has retained its post-national character, embodying a divergence of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups within. For instance, at the regional level, Russian, along with another language, is the official language in 27 territories (Hall 2015:5). Moreover, keeping recent developments such as the annexation of Crimea and the dominated regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in mind, it is evident that *de-territorialization*^[7] within the Russian peninsula is taking place, making it even more difficult to pursue nationalistic politics within a non-fixed territory. Even more importantly, neither of the populations mentioned above in a strict sense share Russian origins. This brings the issue to a detached “post-national membership” (Soysal 1994) constantly embracing an increasing number of ethnic groups within. As a result, Russian politics must confront certain problems on how to consolidate Russian identity. President Putin in one of his speeches addresses this with “[the] rise of civic engagement, civil responsibility and patriotism is consolidating Russian politics” (Vladimir Putin Speech December 12, 2012), and he has further stressed “the revival of national consciousness, the development of Russia as a multinational state and the inadmissibility of any manifestations of nationalism and chauvinism which causes the great damage to the nation...” (Ibid.). As underlined within this statement, the Kremlin is striving toward an inclusive type of identity consolidation, whereby ethnic groups are not expected to pursue such assertive or aggressive chauvinist or nationalist attitudes or movements. This inclusiveness is one of the reasons behind the post-national agenda pursued by the Kremlin, which extends far beyond Russian borders. The same political interest is shared by the CPRF. The party program speaks of “...fighting for the unity, integrity and independence of the Motherland for the recreation of the fraternal union of the Soviet peoples” (CPRF, Party Program).

At this point, it is important to analyze how the Kremlin pursues its goal of maintaining a post-national interaction, as well as the attachment of populations both at home and abroad to the Russian State. *Post-nationalism*, which is often used as a buzzword, has entered academic debate, inviting many pertinent questions. Yet, despite many studies that have been conducted on this issue, post-nationalism still lacks a common definition or explanation. According to Shaw, it can be defined as:

the denial of nationalism, or, perhaps more appropriately, as the attempt to recover and rethink some of the core values of nationalism as lending meaning to a particular community with shared practices and institutions, without the necessary institutional baggage or ideological weight of the modern (nation) state or a negative sense of nationalism as exclusion. (1999:8-9)

[7] De-territorialization is linked to the notion of ‘in-betweenness.’ Bhabha’s notion of in-betweenness refers to “a creative ‘third’ space between traditional readings of the nation and readings of resistance, ‘in betweenness’ refers to the general instability of nations and the potential restructuring of national identity.” See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994). For Bell, “deterritorialisation, and more specifically, an ‘ethics of deterritorialisation’ provides a purposeful means of interconnecting the breakdown of territory with new possibilities of belonging, where there is at work a break from the traditionally accepted community.” See Eleanor Bell, *Questioning Scotland: Literature, Nationalism, Postmodernism*, (NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p. 131.

To comprehend whether the Russian Compatriot policy can be viewed as post-national, there is a need to ascertain some research questions to help clarify the argument put forth. What is argued in the name of a post-national dimension is the emerging level of a political space above the national realm that would complement, but not replace national, regional, and local identities. It pertains to a sum of interests, legacies, aspirations, and reservations within the wider context of a transnational community, namely the Russian World/Community. Differing from national integration as ‘belonging’ or ‘feeling,’ post-national integration is about a ‘sense of loyalty’ towards a polity with a divergence of attachments, whether these be culture, language, past experiences, or interests. For instance, in 2001, Vladimir Putin declared that “the notion of the Russian world extends far from Russia’s geographical borders and even far from the borders of the Russian ethnicity” (Vladimir Putin Speech October 11, 2001).

Among others, the ‘Russian Language’ serves as the unifying force, as well as an identity marker. For Hall “language is the privileged medium in which we make sense of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged. Meanings can only be shared through our common access to language” (Hall 1997:1). Considering that some 260 million individuals speak Russian, it is important to focus on how language comes to be an important factor in shaping this post-national boundary formation. Language is a powerful instrument for encapsulating a heterogeneous group of people through a sociopolitical identity attachment. This brings the focus on the connection between the speakers of Russian language and the bearers of the Russian culture, as well as their respective political positions. The issue does not only pertain to speaking the Russian language, but the politicizing of the language itself. As Schedrovitsky (2001) emphasizes, “those who speak Russian in their everyday life, also think Russian, and as a result act Russian” (cf. Laruelle 2015:5). Similarly, Kolsto points to the importance of broadcasting in the Russian language. As “when the anchor man on the evening news says ‘here’ or ‘we have’ the viewers do not have to be told where ‘here’ is, or who we are for that matter” (Kolsto 2001:158). In that sense, the language disseminates the sense of sharing and belonging, irrespective of where the person is located. As Putin demonstrates “... what matters in the modern world is not where you live geographically, what matters is your mentality, your aspirations and, as I said, the person’s self-identification” (V. Putin Speech at World Congress of Compatriots, 2015). The second assumption of post-national membership, contrary to the single status, is the attachment and belonging of the dual citizens (often referred to as denizens) to a polity regardless of their location. According to the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, this multiplicity not only includes ethnic Russians but also native Russian speakers, their families and descendants, people who have chosen the Russian language as their focus.

It should be emphasized that the post-national boundary does not ignore ethnic, religious or cultural differences. However, it does not use them to draw distinctions or borders. It is an expression and representation of identities, which are “fragmentary, hybrid, and the dynamic notion of the self” (Collinson 2006:182). According to this prediction, this can lead to a polity formation with its own characteristics. However, it still begs the question of what kind of polity is emerging between national and post-national realms. In light of these views, Russian nationalism rests on the dissemination of a de-nationalized political

culture, rather than on establishing a pure national identity for creating a unified public. *The Law on Compatriots*^[8] (1999) provides insight into how the Kremlin approaches the issue of identification. It is clear that Moscow addresses a variety of groups and attachments with Russia, and aims to strengthen these ties through a civic type of identity sharing with a *post-national type of membership*.^[9] However, when compared to Russian citizenship, the term *compatriot* is an ambiguous concept, opening up the debate on who is actually Russian. According to the recent amendments to the law, the term *compatriot* includes different types of membership to the Russian Federation. The concept is defined by Putin (2001) as “not a legal category ... but a spiritual self-identification” (cf. Shevel 2011:89). Following one of the amendments added in 2010, the Compatriots Law currently states “an individual self-identification and his/her practical connection with Russia.” It can be acknowledged from the amendment that the self’s preferences are at the heart of this process, without addressing these preferences based on the needs of a specific group. The compatriot policy is supported by some other mechanisms. For instance, it can serve to strengthen the bond between the fatherland and the diaspora. For this purpose, Russia has initiated a program for the creation of a Russian World aiming to “construct a Russian supra state containing the compatriots” (Conley et al., 2011:12-3) all of whom identify themselves by some means or other with the Russian Federation. The most important mechanism of Compatriotism is the ‘passportization’ policy, which has occurred in very large numbers in the immediate neighborhood. For instance, “from 1992 to 2015, almost 8.5 million people have acquired Russian citizenship; many residents of post-soviet states have viewed attaining Russian citizenship as a desirable goal” (Chudinovskikh and Denisko 2017). In Abkhazia and Ossetia, in particular, prior to 2008, a significant number of individuals were given Russian passports as a means of strengthening the bond between these people and the Russian Federation, irrespective of the side of the border in which they were settled. This move, based on a nostalgia for the past, “constructs language and identity as an inalienable heritage” (Heller 2011:115) within a wider geography. It is clear that the Russian Federation evaluates the issue of Russians abroad as a vital aspect of defining Russian identity not only among the ones residing within the Russian Federation, but also those living abroad. The statement made by Putin in 2005 signifies the importance of this view:

[8] Further amendments to the Law on Compatriots (1999), made in 2006, declare support for compatriots in the field of human rights and freedom protection, the social field, the fields of culture, language, religion, and education, and in the field of information. The law underlines four categories of people: a) citizens of the Russian Federation living abroad, b) individuals who used to have Soviet citizenship, c) individuals who emigrated from the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation, and d) descendants of compatriots, with the exception of descendants of individuals representing titular nations of foreign countries. Oxana Shevel, “Citizens and Compatriots: The Politics of Citizenship Policy in Russia,” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 77*, 2009 Available [Online] at: http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pepm_077.pdf

[9] Post-national membership is a term introduced by Yasemin Nuhoğlu Soysal. Soysal abstains from a fixed definition of the concept post-national and focuses more on a comparison of national and post-national models of membership, which she establishes through the decoupling of rights on one hand and identities on the other. See, Yasemin Nuhoğlu Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.139-141.

...we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian people, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself. (Vladimir Putin Speech April 25, 2005)

It is clear that the Kremlin is eager to extend its Compatriot policy. However, in the long term, the cost is actually much greater than was initially predicted. For instance, anti-Russian campaigns and Western embargos bring to mind the question, tackled in the next section of the paper, of why Russia is willing to take on these burdens.

The Case of Compatriots in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Crimea

Monika Eppinger summarizes the issue of the Crimean crisis, noting “it is rare war where the local population and defending army speak the language of the invader so well,” (Eppinger 2014) which applies to the crisis with Georgia (South Ossetia as well as Abkhazia) back in 2008. The Russian language testifies to how important a common language is in a shared identification of *belonging, place and identity*. Here, the Russian language is used to cement as well as to construct or perhaps to re-construct the borders of what is increasingly referred to as “linguistic landscapes” (Watt & Llamas 2014). The *us* and *them* here requires attention, as it is important how the speakers of the Russian language locate themselves in relation to one another in an era of transnational openness. It is also relevant in how the Kremlin politicizes the language by removing it from the ethnic to the political realm and re-writing the narrative of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. For instance, Putin states “Russia is open to all who identify themselves with its fate” (Vladimir Putin Speech November 26, 2006). In his statement, Putin points to what is known as a community of fate (*Schicksalgemeinschaft*). Placing the emphasis on the network of relationships dominated by the Russian language, Putin’s statement is reminiscent of Williams’ acknowledgement that “members are bound to each other by interdependence, rather than shared values, key is reciprocity, without allegiance or betrayal” (Williams 2003). This brings the attention to the issue of overlapping identities. The ethnic identities within these regions are certainly diverse. However, there is also a shared sense of historic, regional as well as cultural identities.

Before evaluating the current developments in the Georgian separatist regions and the recent Crimean annexation, there is a need to discuss some similar events, which have been experienced within the Russian sphere immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For instance, it is necessary to address the politics of the Russian Federation, with similar arguments, such as the intervention in the Moldovan break-away province Transnistria to protect the Russian-speaking people back in 1991. A ceasefire was reached in 1992 and remains in place to date. In 2006, the people voted in the referendum for the accession of Transnistria to Russia with an outcome of 97.2 % in support. Other events took place in the Baltic region as well, when the Kremlin accused both Estonia and Latvia of pursuing discrimination against the Russian minorities living in these states (Khrychikov 2001). Starting in the early 1990s, the Kremlin

has clearly argued on several occasions that it has the responsibility to protect the lives and the wellbeing of the populations that are linked to Russia culturally, linguistically or historically. The same argument currently applies to Abkhazia, South Ossetia and recently to Crimea. In terms of ethnography, demography and geography, Crimea, South Ossetia and Abkhazia differ greatly. However, an important commonality among these regions is that, aside from having been a part of the Soviet Union in the past, they are characterized by multilingualism. Thus, Russian culture and language is not foreign to the populations living in these regions. Due to the widespread usage of the Russian language, the populations are not hesitant to come closer to the Russian Federation either for protection (*from oppression, assimilation*) or in the hope of receiving certain rights (*use of language, cultural practices*) under certain circumstances.

As unions and autonomous republics, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have enjoyed great autonomy throughout the Soviet era. However, the ethnic tensions within these regions date back to pre-soviet times. This changed rapidly after the breakup of the Soviet Union, whereby the regions of Abkhazia, Ajaria and South Ossetia became parts of the newborn Georgian state. The issue was very complicated from the onset. On one hand, there was a national movement aiming to get rid of the label 'Soviet Union Republic.' On the other, minority nations were trying to gain autonomy, as both Abkhazia and South Ossetia had a certain amount of autonomy within the Soviet Union. Additionally, after the dissolution of the USSR, both South Ossetian and Abkhazian leaders showed sympathy and willingness to remain part of the Russian Federation, rather than the newborn Georgian state.

The current crisis regarding the South Ossetian conflict dates back to 1989, when violent clashes occurred between Ossetians and Georgians. Abkhazia remained in the same situation with the independence of Georgia in 1991. Abkhazia immediately introduced its 1925 constitution, declaring its independence from a united Georgia. The policies of Tbilisi towards both South Ossetia and Abkhazia triggered the situation and both regions lost their autonomy and were forced to accept Georgianization, leading to violent clashes. This lasted until the ceasefire between South Ossetia and Georgia in 1992, which coincided with the start of clashes between Georgia and Abkhazia that halted in 1994 with a ceasefire. Consequently, conflicts in these regions were frozen for a while. Immediately following the revolution, the Saakashvili administration gave the issue renewed prominence, albeit under a new dimension, due to which the relations deteriorated once again. Saakashvili was eager to restore the territorial integrity of the country and Adjara, an autonomous region in the southwest of Georgia, became his first target. While Tbilisi was reorganizing Adjara, Moscow did not interfere in this crisis; instead, its passportization process was initiated, starting with Abkhazia followed by South Ossetia. According to Gordienko (2004), between 2002 and 2003, the number of citizenship holders in Abkhazia increased from 20 % to 80 %. While 56 % of South Ossetia residents were passport holders in 2002, this percentage reached 98 % by 2004 (cf. Nagashima, 2017:3). The Tbilisi administration argued that the conflict was between Georgia and Russia, not between Ossetians and Georgians. Tbilisi, in accusing Moscow for triggering the conflict, claimed it not to be an ethnic but a political problem, that

is, the separatists challenging Georgian territorial integrity. These arguments brought the issue to an interstate level at once and attracted global attention, particularly that of the Russian Federation. The incidents led to an armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Georgia in 2008, which resulted in the formation of two breakaway regions, namely Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both territories are currently under Russian influence and are seeking to establish close relations with Moscow. As the current Abkhazian leader has announced, “Abkhazia and Russia live and develop in common civilization space” (Raul Khajimba Speech September 25, 2014). It can be seen that, in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there is a widespread desire to restore relations with Moscow. For instance, the ‘alliance and integration’ treaties signed between these regions and Russia are indicative of close relations. South Ossetian leader Leonid Tibilov has even furthered their ambition by stating, “we must make our historic choice and be reunited with brotherly Russia so that we can ensure the security and success of our republic and people for many centuries” (Leonid Tibilov Speech October 20, 2015). Although ethnically diverse, South Ossetians belong to the same ethnic group as the neighboring North Ossetians within the Russian Federation. The Russian language is widely used in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, where it is considered *lingua franca*. Kirova (2012) further argues that the people in these regions are more fluent in Russian relative to the Abkhaz and Ossetian languages. This bilingualism creates a strong link between these communities in the name of loyalty to the Russian Federation, regardless of the intergenerational continuum or familial relations, what Novikova (2008) calls “retro–imagination.”^[10] These affinities bring both Ossetians and Abkhazians closer to the Russian Federation, not through a sense of common identity, but rather via a membership marked by geography as well as history. Guided and assisted by Russia via infrastructural development, the renovation of bridges and roads, and the building of government facilities by the Ministry of Regional Development of the Russian Federation, both regions are currently enjoying close relations with Moscow. Chudinovskikh and Denisenko (2017) argue that the borders between the Soviet Republics never served as real barriers, and this is reflected in the current treatment of Russian borders with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

This raises the question of what motivated Moscow to intervene in the South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflict. Dunn and Bobick are right to argue that “Russia prefers to intervene when protecting its people comes to fore alongside a strategic interest” (Dunn and Bobick 2014:407). They further add that the act of Moscow signals “reinstating a durable institutional frame for national cadres, intelligentsias, languages and cultures ... and articulating a national vision to an otherwise disoriented post-soviet population...” (Ibid.). Though accepting this argument, in this work, it is posited that Moscow reflects a post-national policy, rather than a national one, as besides similarities, there are also certain dissimilarities between these people regarding ethnic diversity. It is clear that

^[10] For Novikova, “Retro-imagination is an issue of history, historiography and collective memories.” See, Irina Novikova, “The Image of Russia in the New Abroad: The Russian-Speaking Diaspora along the Baltic,” in Tetsuo Mochizuki (ed.) *Beyond the Empire: Images of Russia in the Eurasian Cultural Context*, (Sapporo: Hokkaido University, 2007).

there are certain strategic interests Moscow aims to achieve. However, approaching the ongoing developments as a solely strategic or security matter narrows the context and makes grasping the full picture difficult.

It is thus important to stress that Moscow acts very carefully in the realm of 'identity' politics, as people who have historic, cultural, lingual, and ethnic bonds with the Russian Federation do not live in similar communities, whether Abkhazian, South Ossetian, Transnistrian or Crimean. President Putin made this clear in one of his speeches, when he noted, "we must think about the interests of the indigenous population. If we don't think about them ... this will only give a pretext for various radical organizations to promote themselves" (cf. Zevelev 2008:60). This message reflects Putin's ambition to protect the multi-ethnic and multi-faith nature of the Russian territory. Similarly, the Georgian crisis emerged out of his desire to protect the wellbeing of the people living in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, the wording of 'radical' stresses extreme nationalist discourses, which according to the Kremlin require prevention. For instance the UR party renders and resists nationalist calls, such as tougher stances from political and intellectual figures like Sergei Mironov (leader of the Just Russia Party) and a well-known intellectual, Alexander Dugin. Careful to avoid making the same mistakes as the Soviets, the Kremlin is not pursuing a policy of 'us' and 'them' as a means of alienation or otherness. By the same token, Moscow intends to strengthen the internal integrity of the country as well as embrace the highly diversified Russians living abroad. Speaking about the National Unity Day, which is celebrated on November 4 every year, President Putin states, "this holiday symbolizes the unity of the multi-ethnic people of Russia and the compatriots living abroad" (Vladimir Putin Public Speech November 5, 2015). This speech, and many more delivered by President Putin, remains as a strong identifier of inclusiveness. This brands the 'Russian people' and extends this community beyond the borders of Russia.

Different cultural, ethnic, and lingual groups reside in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Crimea, and all currently remain on the Russian track, constantly rephrasing their bonds with the Russian Federation. Their common ground is actually the history they share, leading to an understanding of closeness between these populations. Back in 2005, the Abkhazian leader Sergei Bagapsh summarized this as "Abkhazia is tied to Russia by an umbilical cord" (German 2006:9). According to a public survey in Abkhazia, most of the population welcomes Russia's presence and have stated that they feel secure for the first time in years (Kirova 2012:23-4). Yet, gaining a better understanding of each of these cases requires establishing how they contribute to Russia's post-national framework. The number of people holding Russian passports gives some indication of the eagerness of people to sustain their bonds with Moscow. Since 2002, Moscow has aimed to establish educational, cultural, economic, lingual and other ties with people living in territories in close proximity to Russia. According to the 'Law on Citizenship of the Russian Federation' (2002), people residing outside the Russian Federation were given the chance to exchange their Soviet passports for a Russian equivalent. In South Ossetia and Abkhazia, nearly 90% of people applied and obtained Russian passports even before the outbreak of the conflict with Georgia in 2008 (German 2006). Once

Abkhazia and South Ossetia gained independence, passport issuance for the residents of these regions by Russia ceased and the matter of dual citizenship remains unresolved. While negotiations continue, Moscow's primary focus is on the annexation of Crimea. Despite differences between Crimean and the aforementioned cases, the same "passportization policy" was also applied in Crimea (Hedenskog 2008). On the other hand, as Crimea is home to a much larger number of Russians compared to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and due to its strategic location and historical value, it has always been important for the Russian Federation. President Putin has summarized the importance of Crimea as follows: "everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptised. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus" (Vladimir Putin Speech in the State Duma, March 18, 2014). As Vladimir Putin has stated, there is a shared common history that makes up an important part of Russian identity.

For about 168 years, Crimea was a part of both imperial and Soviet Russia and remained so until 1991. It became the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic when Nikita Khrushchev passed Crimea to Ukraine in 1954. This event did not receive much attention at that time, as Ukraine itself constituted a part of the USSR (Bebler 2015:201-2). However, immediately following the Soviet dissolution, Crimea started to increase in value. Besides being pulled between Ukraine and Russia at both ends, due to the obvious strategic interest, the region also became the arena for internal conflict between the "prevailing orientation towards Russian language and culture on the part of the majority of Crimea's population, the region's short-lived but influential Russian nationalist movement advocating separatism, and Crimean Tatars homeland politics" (Sasse 2007:14). The Crimean population is mostly comprised of ethnic Russians (60.1%), followed by Ukrainians (24.9%) and Crimean Tatars (9.1%), according to the 2008 census (Razumkov Center Report 1998:3). It is an ethnically mixed geography and, as a result, each community has a different political position regarding the region's trajectory. President Putin has made this clear in a speech delivered on Crimea, as "Crimea is a unique blend of different people's cultures and traditions. This makes it similar to Russia as a whole, where not a single ethnic group has been lost over the centuries" (Vladimir Putin Speech March 18, 2014). Moreover, the linguistic identity is an important factor in whether people define themselves as Ukrainian or Crimean Tatar, as many speak Russian as their native language, in addition to using a mixture of both Ukrainian and Russian called *Surzhyk*^[11] in their daily practices. The intention of Moscow is to ensure that Russian, Ukrainian and Tatar are recognized as equally important national languages in Crimea. This has led to a double identity among the inhabitants of Crimea both culturally and historically. As Putin stated on the anniversary of Crimean attachment "we are talking not simply about territory ... we are talking about historical roots, the sources of our spirituality and statehood" (Vladimir Putin Speech March 18, 2015). It is important to stress that the Russian

11 A kind of hybrid language. See, Laada Bilaniuk, *Contested Tongues: Language Politics and Cultural Correction in Ukraine*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

language is important in the Crimean region as it facilitates inter-ethnic communication. For instance, the majority (81%) of the Crimean population declared Russian as their native language (Razumkov Center Report 1998:8). In addition, Putin has stated "...for centuries, Russian language has been the language of interethnic communication for the numerous ethnic groups of the Eurasian continent" (V. Putin Speech at World Congress of Compatriots, November 5, 2015). In his remarks, the Russian language is deemed to be far more inclusionary, exceeding the scope of this study.

As previously noted, there is no uniform or homogenous post-soviet community. Nonetheless, the recent developments in the region have ushered a change in the understanding of the term 'community' in the post-soviet geography. Each region or state has a heterogeneous character and, as result, different groups follow different trajectories. In the name of fulfilling these objectives, the "communities are becoming less bounded; individuals are involved in increasingly complex and competing social and political networks that divide their loyalties; and institutional loyalties are becoming more fluid" (Dalton 1996:8). Within this fluidity, besides those residing within the Russian Federation territory, a significant number of people living outside the Russian borders have a strong affiliation to Russia, due to factors like psychology (memory), cultural background, and bilingualism, among others. As addressed in the preceding section, the Law on Compatriots is a matter of free choice covering a civic quality with a broader group of people who link themselves to Russia, including people who were actually a part of the Tsarist Empire and USSR (Laruelle 2015:94). The Law on Compatriots applies to Crimeans as well. According to a survey, 70.7% of Crimeans were keen to obtain Russian passports and felt that this policy of the Kremlin did not harm Ukraine (Razumkov Center Report 1998:8). In addition to this law, Russia has also implemented the Federal Target Programme Russian Language in 2011-2015, underlining its importance as "support for the Russian language teaching as the basis for the development of integration processes in the Commonwealth of Independent States, meeting of the linguistic and cultural needs of the compatriots living abroad" (Russian Ministry of Education and Science, 2011). The State Program for Assistance to the Voluntary Resettlement of Compatriots Living Abroad to the Russian Federation is another important initiative, as it is aimed at mass distribution of passports and pensions.

Moscow has no intention to use past experiences such as *Russifying* people, a process of cultural assimilation carried out during the Soviet era. In confessing this failure Putin states, "there have been major mistakes whose fruit is the present *Russophobia* among Eastern Europeans" (cf. Tuminez 2000:3). It is not accurate to argue that, today, the Kremlin is pursuing such policies in its vicinity, as the more the Kremlin exceeds its boundaries, the more it becomes multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. In the cases of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Crimea, which were the subject of the analyses presented here, there is change in political behavior towards Moscow. This gives Moscow only one option—to pursue a post-national strategic move. First, Moscow has no intention to initiate the mass-deportation, oppression, or assimilation of these people within a *melting-pot* model. It rather intends to approach the issue from a post-national perspective, with an awareness of the differences (akin to a *salad-bowl*) and demand consultation, negotia-

tion, and bargaining for attaining a common ground. Secondly, it is no secret that the Kremlin has certain strategic interests in the aforementioned regions. As argued in this paper, Moscow uses the pre-existing bonds as a means of achieving strategic interests, rather than to create a pan-ethnic Russian State (or Empire for that matter).

Conclusion

Identity politics is becoming an elusive field of research. As analyzed throughout this article, the Russian sphere is an interesting case, where alongside the ongoing developments the issue of identification is reconstructed. Language plays an important role as a carrier of identity. Analyses of the cases of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Crimea has revealed diversified attachments to Russia, despite a shared sense of community based on the common language. As analyzed in depth, the Kremlin has pursued policies like ‘Compatriotism’ and ‘passportization’ in an effort to create a post-national boundary, where a significant number of people are eager to strengthen their bonds with the Russian Federation. The acceptance of Russian presence in these aforementioned cases amounts to an understanding of the Russian Federation via the Russian language, narrating a wider geography, and grasping its very diverse (social, ethnic, religious) composition. This brings the focus on the issue of a re-bordering—in the cultural domain—where the Kremlin is pursuing certain policies to embrace people who find themselves by some means or other attached to the Russian fate. This correlates with post-nationalism, as the policies that are currently being carried out by the Kremlin define ‘Russia’ within a much broader meaning that embraces diversity while emphasizing shared history.

In order to locate the politics of the Kremlin accurately, as argued in the paper, the current Georgian and Crimean crises require a post-national understanding. In this endeavor, an ambiguous concept such as *Russian people* requires special attention, as it implicitly includes ethnic Russians, eastern Slavs, and Russian speakers with divergent ethnic origins. In approaching a sensitive area such as identity, the Kremlin is pursuing a post-national policy towards its nearby territories, placing the abovementioned *Russian people* at the heart of this subject. It is clear that Russian elites pursue a *Rossiskaya community of citizens* project, sheltering the current Russian territory as well as its close geography, irrespective of ethnic, lingual or religious differences. This open and more inclusive project of identification rests on Moscow’s compatriot policy. There is an ongoing reconstruction of a Russian identification and boundary. As a result of the diverging attachments to Russia, in this work, these attachments were treated as post-national, rather than national issues. This is not to argue for a replacement of one political order by another, but an inclusive way of thinking about collective identification within a wider context.

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