



Russia's New National Identity under Putin's Regime

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Putin is recreating a Russian national identity for a disoriented and traumatized Russian people. He is doing so by drawing on traditional nationalist and Russian Orthodox religious themes and symbols that pump Russia's "greatness," along with harsh anti-Western messaging. While politically lucrative, Putin's direction is potentially explosive.

An underdeveloped identity is a key factor in understanding Russia's foreign and domestic policies. Twenty-five years have passed since the dissolution of the USSR; yet, the post-Soviet national character remains undetermined. "Finding and strengthening national identity really is fundamental for Russia," Vladimir Putin recently consented.

"Finding" is the key word in this statement, because an indistinct and ambiguous national identity is Russia's ever-present problem. Is it European or Asian? Does being Russian also mean being an Orthodox Christian? Most importantly, what holds the country together – what are its common values and goals?

The process of the creation, negation, and recreation of the national identity is a "red thread" that goes through Russia's turbulent past. Presently, a sense of commonality is being challenged by the abrupt dissolution of the Soviet state, whose citizens must cope with the irrelevance of their former system of values

and self-representation. Russians talk about a split between who they were before December 1991, and who they have become since.

People with a vague perception of themselves and of their sociopolitical space are bound to be confused, vacillating, insecure, and prone to negative self-identification. As such, they are more likely to derive their identity by contrasting themselves to others and more inclined to surrender to a leader who provides them with a collective frame of reference.

To the political scene comes Putin, who does exactly that. He offers to the disoriented and traumatized Russians an identity. Not that he really united Russia in any meaningful way. It is still conflict-ridden and atomized. Nor did he give his people any new system of beliefs or a vision to compensate for the crushing disappointment with Communism. Instead, Putin reformulated and popularized among his citizens one key concept: What unites everyone who lives on Russian soil is that their state is “great.” Putin did not invent the concept of Russia’s “greatness,” but readapted it as the essence of a post-Soviet identity.

In his propaganda, Putin emphasizes anything “great” he can find or invent, including “the great Russian land,” “great Russian literature,” and “the great Russian soul.” More specifically, he accentuates how national greatness is represented within the statehood and its glory. The Russians have therefore been willing to accept the absence of any new set of principles, ideas, or values, so long as they can be part of the “great” national whole.

The alleged “greatness” of Russia is obviously compensatory. It may not cure the wound of not having a meaningful, time-proven, and integrated identity, but it will do as a bandage. Millions of Putin’s followers have been grateful indeed, as is evident by his overwhelming support ratings. He has not solved Russia’s economic problems, nor has he eradicated corruption. He has been steadily eliminating any chances of a stable democracy. But, one thing he did do: He has found a unifying label, which people have been craving since the early 1990s.

The official line is that Russian citizens have always been part of the same tradition, fused by the greatness of their state—under the tsars, under the Bolsheviks, and even under Stalin’s “Great Terror.” Instead of repudiating its past, the nation must be proud that it has endured “great sufferings.” These sacrifices have yielded great national achievements.

Presently, the country has taken upon itself to “overcome the great trials” of the recent past, i.e. the debilitating confusion of the Yeltsin era. At that time, Russia imitated the West, instead of realizing how great it is in comparison to it. “Do not forget,” urges an official propaganda film, “the pit from which president Putin has pulled out the country,” since “foreign enemies seek to dump it into the garbage bin of history.” Russia’s quasi-identity thus receives much of its nourishment from a negative self-identification, which is juxtaposed against the identity of the West.

Until January 2012, Putin did not aim to sell his people a well-formulated ideology; some messianic project or mission. However, following the May 2008 economic crisis and the December 2011 popular protests against elections frauds, it became difficult to sustain public support without a coherent message. To sustain its legitimacy, the regime chose to delineate a more national-patriotic and anti-western direction, grounding its appeal on a strong conservative, Orthodox foundation.

In his speech at the Valdai International Discussion Forum in September 2013, Putin declared that while Russia is rediscovering itself, “many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including Christian values . . . They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious, and even sexual.” In Europe and America, God and the Satan are equated, and this causes the West to experience total “degradation and primitivization.” After the crisis in Ukraine erupted, foreign minister Sergei Lavrov complained that the godless West coerces the Russians for being Christian traditionalists.

In Russian political tradition, people are dispensable and disposable, and, overwhelmingly, they accept that no other treatment is warranted. In return they want to be part of something “great,” in order to add meaning to their sacrifices. This is why many Russians today claim that while they may be oppressed, they are proud to have managed to take over Crimea. By annexing Crimea, Putin sent his citizens a clear message. His policy was in line with Russia’s new image, since only a “great” country can get away with such boldness. His strategy seems to be successful. According to a leading independent polling agency, Russians have *never* been more supportive of Putin. His approval rating in October 2014 was a preposterous 88%.

The “Crimea-is-ours” catchphrase has become a motto of official patriotism. Putin even frames the annexation as a case of ethnic irredentism, aimed at re-uniting the “historical Russian land” and its ethnic Russian population with the rest of

the nation. Back in the 10th century, Prince Vladimir, the founder of the Russian statehood, was baptized in the Crimea. In line with his new appeal towards religion, Putin therefore claims that it is as sacred for the Russian people as the Temple Mount is for the Muslims and the Jews.

Given the country's multicultural composition, this comeback to traditional nationalist and Orthodox agenda, though temporarily politically lucrative, is potentially explosive.

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