Russian nation-building from Yeltsin to Medvedev: 
Ethnic, civic, or purposefully ambiguous?

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Abstract:

This study surveys nation-building efforts in post-Soviet Russia, showing how all five dominant ways of imagining the “true” Russian nation have been fraught with contradictions and therefore could not easily guide state policies. Nevertheless, a solution to Russian nation-building dilemma may be emerging. This solution does not resolve the contradictions associated with each of the nation-building agendas but instead legalizes ambiguous definition of nation’s boundaries in the 1999 law on compatriots. The fuzzy definition of compatriots in the law allows Russia to pursue a variety of objectives and to target at a variety of groups without solving contradictions of existing nation-building discourses.
1. Introduction.

Russia’s nation-building process – the search to define the “us” and the “other” of the Russian state – has been, to quote former President Putin, an “age-old Russian pastime” (Putin 2007), and has remained a priority for the Russian political and intellectual elites in the post-Soviet era (Tolz 2004, p. 177). The next section examines the politics of nation-building in post-Soviet Russia, focusing in particular on why both civic and ethnic nation-building agendas proved hard to articulate and implement. Section three shows how state policies during Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev presidencies have been affected by these contradictions and ambiguities. Section four suggests that the vexing nature of Russia’s nation-building dilemma may have found a surprising legal solution in the designation of the fuzzily defined “compatriots” (sootechestvenniki) as the “us” group of the Russian state. The designation of compatriots as “us” does not solve the contradictions associated with each of the nation-building agendas but instead legalizes the ambiguity on the question of nation’s boundaries. This legal vagueness served a functional purpose as it allows the government to pursue a broad range of policies, to re-direct these policies when is sees fit, and to target a broad range of groups in the former Soviet space without committing to any one of the nation-building discourses, and without resolving the contradictions associated with each one.

2. The Russian identity crisis: civic, ethnic, or…?

Civic and ethnic nationalisms are two main approaches to defining “criteria of membership in the political collectivity” (Greenfeld 1992, p. 11). Civic nationalism defines the nation as a community of state’s citizens united by the territory of the state and loyalty to state’s political institutions, while ethnic nationalism defines the nation by some inherent ethno-cultural characteristics, such as ethnicity, language, and/or religion. Following Hans Kohn (Kohn 1944), civic “Western” nationalism is commonly associated with tolerance, liberalism, and the overcoming of ethnic divisions, while ethnic “Eastern” nationalism is seen as more bellicose, xenophobic, and authoritarian.

Applying the civic/ethnic dichotomy to the analysis of nation-building policies is associated with several difficulties. Most generally, these are ideal categories, while in reality most countries’ policies combine elements of both (Kuzio 2002; Shulman 2002). But in addition to this problem – which some have argued should not be overestimated since most categories are ideal types but could still give us theoretical leverage (Barrington 2006, p.
12) – there are additional problems with applying civic/ethnic typology to the Russian case. The first problem has to do with the fact that former imperial powers such as Russia could pursue two very different types of civic policies. Civic nationalism defines the nation by the territory of the state, but former imperial powers can define the nation by the territory of the current state, or by the territory of the former empire (or a part of this territory). In both cases the principle is territory rather than blood, and thus both are arguably civic, but they reflect very different image of the nation, with different consequences for domestic state and nation-building as well as foreign relations. Particularly important difference is that while civic nationalism that defines the nation by the territory of the existing state is non-irredentist, civic nationalism that defines the nation by the territory of the former empire is potentially irredentist.

Second, the applicability of the ethnic label to the Russian case is also problematic. Scholars have argued that the use of the ethnic label obscures the existence of, and difference between, different types of ethnic nationalism (Shulman 2002). In Russia, the ethnic options for defining the nation are: Russia as a community of ethnic Russians, as a community of Eastern Slavs, or as a community of Russian-speakers. All of these are ethnic rather than civic because they rely on cultural rather than political or territorial criteria, but they differ substantially in terms of their internal logic, their implications for Russia’s relations with neighboring states, and for the territorial integrity of the Russian state itself. Table 1 shows how five “images” of the nation (two “civic” and three “ethnic”) that have had prominence in Russia in the post-Soviet period differ in terms of their potential irredentism and consequences for Russia’s territorial integrity. The remainder of this section will discuss why all five definitions of the Russian nation are problematic, making their adoption as state policy difficult.

[Table 1 about here]

The nation defined by the territory of the existing state

Definition of the Russian nation by the territory of the existing Russian state, the textbook “civic” definition, has the advantage of making, to use Gellner’s terms (Gellner 1983), the national unit “congruent” with the existing political one. Another advantage is that this definition also does not exclude Russia’s ethnic minorities from the body of the civic rossiiskaia nation (although, as will be discussed below, non-Russians do have some
problems with this definition). At the same time, the civic rossiiskaia nation idea is fraught with significant difficulties. First, it is a nation-building project without historical precedence in Russia. For centuries Russia developed as an empire extending over much larger territory, and Russian identity developed neither as an ethnic identity nor as a territorial identity tied to the territory of the Russian republic within the USSR, but as a supra-national identity that “was most closely identified with Soviet, proletarian, and progress” (Suny 1993, p. 112), and which saw as its national home the USSR as a whole (Brudny 2001; Lieven 1999; Suny 1993). Creating a civic territorial nation in the post-Soviet Russian Federation was thus a monumental intellectual and practical project which required Russia, to quote one scholar, “to succeed from itself, to create new identity based on the denial of the Soviet past, … to fall into emptiness [and] start its history from a blank slate” (Morozov 2009, p. 429).

Secondly, the intellectual construction of civic rossiiskaia nation understood as a community of citizens goes against a “mental inertia” of the Soviet era – the still-prevailing understanding of nation as an ethnic community (Tishkov 2009c, p. 40, Tishkov 1996). The idea of the civic nation a community of rossiiskii fellow citizens integrated by the state who may have different cultural and linguistic characteristics is different from the idea of Russia a community of (over 150) ethnic nations, including the ethnic Russian (russkii) nation, which together comprise multinational people (mnogonatsional’nyi narod) (Malakhov 2004; Osipov 2004). The former is the “classic” civic nation since it sees nation as a community of citizens, not of ethnic groups, but the latter is the one reflected in the official documents such as the 1993 Russian Constitution which talks about the multinational Russian people (mnogonatsional’nyi rossiiski narod), and the 1996 Conception of State Nationality Policy which defined the mnogonatsional’nyi narod as a collection of ethnic groups, with the Russian ethnic group (russkii narod) playing a “unifying role” and serving as the “basis of statehood.”

Thirdly, and somewhat paradoxically, the definition of civic nation as a community of fellow citizens is viewed with suspicion by both the Russian ethnic nationalists who see the rossiiski project as discriminating against the ethnic Russians in favor of ethnic minorities, as well as by many non-Russian elites who fear that rossiiski project is a disguise for assimilation and Russification of the non-Russian groups. Opposing rossiiski concept, during a recent parliamentary debate an MP from the Rodina party argued as follows:

You want to create some rossiiskaia nation. … And I am posing a question: do you want to deprive us of ethnicity (natsional’nost)? You crossed from the constitution the term russkii, you crossed from the passports the term russkii, not a single draft law contains the term russkii! … The
strategic task [is] to reduce the number of russkoie population in the Russian Federation. If this is done consciously … this is bordering on state treason.¹

Leaders of important ethnic groups, in particular Tatars and Bashkirs, give equally scathing assessment of the idea of rossiiskaia nation as a community of fellow citizens. In August 2009, the World Kurultay of Bashkirs and the World Congress of Tatars released a joint appeal attacking the draft Conception of a Federal Law “On the Foundations of Government Nationality Policy in the Russian Federation” prepared by the Moscow Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology. The appeal asserted that the draft conception’ attempt “to replace the concept of “multinational people of the RF” … with the concept of “all-civic Russian nation” (obshchegrazhdanskaia rossiiskaia natsia) is aimed at the assimilation of the peoples of the Russian Federation.” Equating “attempts to create the so-called all-civic Russian nation” with the Soviet-era attempts to create “a single Soviet people,” the appeal asserted that “in practice this again comes down to centuries-old policy of assimilation of indigenous peoples of the country.”²

Fourthly, the meaning of rossiiskaia nation as it is articulated by its proponents, most notably by Valerii Tishkov, the head of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology and the former Minister of Nationalities, is indeed ambiguous and not free of ethnic undertones. Tishkov has defined the civic nation “as the historical and sociocultural community of the country’s inhabitants” (Tishkov 2009c, p. 55) but has also talked about Russia as “a

¹ MP Nikolai Pavlov during first reading of the draft law on migration registration of foreigners and stateless persons in the state Duma on 17 March 2006. Stenographic report available at http://www.akdi.ru/gd/PLEN_Z/2006/03/s17-03_v.htm, accessed 20 October 2009. For a similar sentiment, see also an article by Vitalii Averianov, head of the Center for Dynamic Conservatism, tellingly titled “Russia without Russians (russkie),” which criticized draft conception of nationality policy prepared by United Russia in 2007 (Averianov 2007).

² “Tatary i Bashkiry vystupili protiv kontseptsii natsionalnoi politiki RF,” MariUver, 4 August 2009, available at: http://mariuver.wordpress.com/2009/08/04/tatary-bashkiry/, accessed 20 October 2009. The Mordvin activists also announced their support of this Tatar-Bashkir declaration. The groups that issued the appeal have been denounced as radical in the past, but, as Paul Goble noted, the fact that the Finno-Ugric Mordvins joined the Turkic Tatars and Bashkirs in denouncing the draft “suggest that the issues the appeal raises reflect the views of many people in that region and perhaps more generally as well.” (Goble 2001).
nation of nations” (natsia natsii), a “multiethnic civic nation” (mnogonatsional’nai grazhdanskaia natsia) where the “Russian (russkaia) ethnonation and Russian language … have become dominant (to put more correctly, referent culture[s])… for the whole country” (Tishkov 2009a, also Tishkov 2009b). It is thus not all together clear if the rossiiskaia nation is supposed to be a community of fellow citizens with various ethnic identities or a community of ethnic groups, and if it’s the latter, then how exactly the rossiiskaia nation concept is different from the concept of mnogonatsional’nyi rossiiskii narod that the rossiiskaia nation concept is supposed to replace. How Russocentric the rossiiskaia nation is also open to interpretation. As a result, Tishkov personally and the concept of rossiiskaia nation he advocates often find themselves in an unfortunate position of being simultaneously accused of ethnic Russocentrism and of disregard if not downright betrayal of the interests of ethnic Russians.

Conceptual ambiguity and definitional dilemma also plague a variant of civic nation-building which envisages the Russian nation as a nation of ethnic Russians plus of ethnic groups indigenous (korennyie) to Russia. This nation-building agenda has received less scholarly attention in western studies than the rossiiskaia nation agenda, but in recent years Russian political elites have frequently talked about it. In some cases, these are the same elites who earlier advocated different nation-building agendas, suggesting that this conception may be gaining support. For example, representatives of the Communist party and the nationalist Rodina party on various occasions advocated conceptualization of the “us” as ethnic Russians plus indigenous peoples.3

Since ethnic Russians are explicitly equated with other indigenous ethnic groups in this conceptualization of the nation, this conception is more difficult to accuse of being russocentric than the rossiiskaia nation project that often emphasized the special place of ethnic Russians in the nation. The dilemma however lies in defining just what groups are indigenous. Two possible definitions have been articulated. One defines as indigenous all ethnic groups

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3 For example, Communist MP Georgii Tikhonov, previously one of the most vocal advocates of the idea that Russia should extend its citizenship to all former Soviet citizens, in 2003 tabled an amendment to the citizenship law which proposed extending the Russian citizenship to “compatriots” whom he defined as “members of ethnic groups indigenous to Russia who do not have territorial homelands outside the Russian Federation”(Tikhonov 2003). In 2006, a representative of Rodina party, MP Andrei Saveliev, argued that Russia's migration policy should be aimed at attracting ethnic Russians and “representatives of indigenous peoples of Russia” (Gosudarstvennaia Duma Rossiiskoi Federatsii 2006).
“who live on the territory of the Russian Federation and who do not have state formations outside its borders.”

This formulation incorporates residents of Russia and as ethnic Russians and members of Russia’s smaller ethnic groups living outside Russia in the body of the nation, but it excludes, among others, Ukrainians and Belarussians since they have state formations outside Russia. As will be discuss below, the explicit exclusion of Ukrainians and Belarussians from the body of the “true” nation is highly problematic in Russia, which complicates this nation-building agenda.

The second approach to defining indigenous peoples places emphasis not on whether or not a given group has a homeland state elsewhere, but how long representatives of this group have lived on the territory or Russia. This approach allows including many more ethnicities in the indigenous category, including Ukrainian and Belarussians, but as a practical matter making any kind of definitive list of such groups is all but impossible. As Leonid Grebanovski of the Federal Migration Service (FMS) confessed in an interview, in 1994 the Presidential Administration tried to make a list of indigenous groups, and determined that “we can count as “ours” all population of Bulgaria, and half of Greece’s,” and concluded that “for multiethnic state such as Russia such lists are impossible in principle since there would definitely be groups who would feel themselves discriminated” (Dobriukha 2004). Due to the difficulty of defining “indigenousness,” therefore, a conception of Russia as a state of ethnic Russians plus indigenous peoples is also problematic and thus does not solve Russia’s nation-building dilemma.

The fifth obstacle to civic nation-building in Russia is Russia’s ethno-federal structure. Russia’s institutional design as a multi-ethnic federation with territorially institutionalized ethnicity is a legacy of the Soviet ethnic federalism. Russia’s ethno-federal structure is more logically consistent with the idea of Russian nation as a multinational people comprising many ethnic nations, some with territorial homelands in ethnically-defined units of the federation, than with the idea of the nation as a community of fellow citizens. If the nation is a community of fellow citizens with equal rights, why should citizens of some ethnicities have “their” territorial formations while others do not? Why should non-ethnically defined oblasts and krais have lower institutional status than ethnically defined republics? Why should there be institutional and power asymmetry between ethnically-defined republics, okrugs, and oblast?  

4 Vladimir Miloser dov, chairman of the Russian (russkkaia) Party, defined the indigenous thus during parliamentary hearings on the draft law “On Russian (russkii) people” (Komitet po delam natsional'nosteii Gosudarstvennoi Dumy Rossiiskoi Federatsii 2001). The same definition is contained in Tikhonov 2003.
Asymmetric ethnically-based federalism may not square well with the idea of the civic nation, but getting rid of it in the 1990s was not feasible given that in his power struggles at the federal center President Yeltsin needed to attract support from the regional elites. President Putin was better positioned to take on the regional elites, and has taken some measures that, even though their primary aim was centralization of presidential political power, could become first steps in the possible future dismantlement of ethnic institutional architecture of Russia. Among such steps are the elimination of bi-lateral agreements between the federal center and the subjects of the federation; the creation of seven “super-regions” headed by representative appointed by the president; the change from popular election to presidential appointment of the regional governors; and changed electoral system for the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament (Petrov & Slider 2007).

A particularly telling step towards possible future abolition of ethno-federalism was the merger of some ethnic autonomous okrugs with larger Russian oblasts undertaken during Putin’s presidency. These mergers, which eliminated four of the ten autonomous okrugs by the end of Putin’s presidency, could be an experiment that may lead to the gradual erosion if not total abolition of ethnic federalism (Akturk 2009, chapter 8). Plans to reduce the number of Russian administrative units from its present 83 to as low as 30-40 entities have been reported, and intentions to do away with the ethno-federal nature of Russian federalism found their reflection in the draft Conception of the law “On the Foundations of Government Nationality Policy in the Russian Federation.” One of the main objections the World Kurultay of Bashkirs and the World Congress of Tatars to this draft was that the conception “completely ignores the existence of national republics” and its call for “so-called ‘new approaches to the development of legislation in the sphere of government nationality policy’ is based on the leveling of all subjects of the Russian Federation which in practice would mean the gradual liquidation of republics within the Russian

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5 Two other autonomous okrugs (Taymyrskiy (Dolgano-Nenetskiy) AO and Evenkiyskiy AO) were merged with Krasnoiarskii krai but retained their AO designations. For details of the okrug mergers undertaken under Putin, see The Permanent Committee on Geographic Names 2008.

6 Akturk also identifies another Putin-era reform, the abolition of the Ministry of Nationalities, as yet another indication that reflects the preference of the Putin’s administration for a centralized and homogenizing state.

7 Nezavisimaia Gazeta, 12 April 2006, as cited in The Permanent Committee on Geographic Names 2008, p. 3.
Elimination of ethno-federalism may facilitate civic nation-building in the future, but as long as the ethno-federal principle of Russia’s federalism remains it will continue to constitute a logical and practical impediment to civic nation-building project.

The sixth factor that complicates civic nation-building and the definition of the Russian nation by the borders of the current Russian state is the presence of millions of Russians in the former Soviet republics. Lievin is right to argue that “no Russian state – even a liberal, capitalist and democratic one – will ever be able to abandon all claims to a right of protection over ethnic Russians outside Russia” (Lieven 1999, p. 69, emphasis in the original), but so are Breslauer and Dale when they emphasize that this creates a dilemma – how to create “a formula that entailed de-ethnicised nation-building within the territorial boundaries of Russia, [and] ethicised governmental responsibility for Russians in the Near Abroad” (Breslauer & Dale 1997, p. 330).

Finally, the lack of democracy in Russia is arguably another impediment to civic nation-building project, as scholars have argued that civic nation refers not only to the way political community is defined (i.e., territorially or ethnically), but also to the role of society vis-à-vis the state (Greenfeld 1992, p. 10). In the absence of democracy in Russia, this argument goes, “the idea of a civic nation is replaced by the opposite, imperial concept of unity within a strong state” (Pain 2009, p. 64, also Tolz 2004).

The four remaining nation-building options in Table 1 (territorial definition of the nation by the borders of the USSR, and three ethnic definitions – Russia as a state of ethnic Russians, of Eastern Slavs, or of Russian-speakers) have the advantage of being able to draw on a “usable past” to a greater extent than the rossiiskaia nation project, albeit to a different degree. At the same time, each of these four options is also associated with profound dilemmas, making their adoption as state policy difficult.

*The nation as ethnic Russians*

The argument that the Russian state ought to officially recognize ethnic Russians (*russkie*) as the most important group is well articulated and goes along the following lines. Because ethnic Russians constitute over 80% of the Russian population, it is not accurate to describe Russia as a multiethnic country since states with similar

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ethnic composition are commonly described as a monoethnic state. Russia should thus be defined as a monoethnic state in the Constitution. Ethnic Russians have been disadvantaged in both the Soviet Union and in the current Russian Federation and this injustice must be corrected. Russians have been the main victim of the totalitarian policies and catastrophes of the twentieth century, and in the post-Soviet period are suffering the most from the demographic decline. Throughout the Soviet period Russians have been sponsoring the development of other ethnic groups while remaining institutionally underprivileged themselves, and remain underprivileged in the structure of Russian federalism today. They do not have their “own” national statehood distinct from the Russian statehood, and their representation in the organs of power is lower than their proportion in the population. As a result of the USSR collapse which left some 25 million ethnic Russians outside of Russia’s borders, Russians have also become a “divided people” (разделенный народ) and their right to unification should be recognized.

The obstacles to the implementation of this “image” of the nation in state policies are several. First, stunted development of a strong sense of Russian ethnic identity in both the Russian empire and the USSR complicated ethnic nation-building project. The narrowly ethnic understanding of the Russian nation is not very popular. Opinion polls show that no more than a quarter of Russia’s citizens define “Russianness” by ‘passport’ ethnicity, and less than half of the Russian population supports the idea of a privileged status of ethnic Russians in Russia.

9 Israel, Vietnam, and Spain are often cited as examples of states that have the same or lower percentage of the titular ethnicity and that are recognized as monoethnic.

10 All of these arguments were made, for example, during the parliamentary hearing on the “Russian idea” on 15 October 1996 (Государственное Совет Федерация 1997), and during 25 May 2001 hearing in the Duma Committee on Nationalities of a draft law “On the Russian people” (о русском народе) (Комитет по делам национальностей Государственной Думы 2001 #1706).

11 A 1995 poll by the Public Opinion Foundation 24% considered Russian passport ethnicity necessary to be a Russian (poll results in Tolz 1998b, p. 1015). In a December 2006 VTSIOM poll, 15% identified Russianness by ethnicity (VTSIOM 2006).

12 Levada Center polls conducted in 2000 and 2008 found that the percentage of those who support this idea partially or fully is consistent at 47%, while 43% (42% in 2000) opposed the idea, and another 11% were undecided. Analiticheskii tsentr Iuria Levady "Levada-tsentr" 2008, p. 141.
The second obstacle to the ethnic nation-building project is the danger to the territorial integrity and unity of the state inherent in it. Russians are institutionally less endowed than the non-Russian ethnic groups since they do not have a designated territorial homeland within the current structure of the Russian federation, but an institutional correction to this state of affairs could lead to, as the first deputy head of the Presidential Administration and the main ideologue of the Kremlin, Vladislav Surkov, has warned, “the eviction of russkie from the multinational Russia. … to the “russkaia republic” in the borders of early muscovite kingdom” (Surkov 2006).

Proponents of Russia for the Russians idea actually usually do not call for the creation of a Russian republic within Russia but instead call for the official recognition that the Russian people (russkie) are the only state-forming (gosudarstvoobrazuiushchii) people that has exercised its right to self-determination on the whole territory of Russia (Sevastianov 2001), and advocate a unified state rather than a federal one (Tolz 1998a, p. 277). This path would clearly be opposed by the non-Russian ethnic elites, and Russian leadership realizes danger inherent in pursuing this path. As chief of staff of the Duma committee on nationalities warned, “the realization of the idea of the Russian (russkaia) republic is only possible under two conditions: first, by annulling the rights of the republics within the Russian Federation and extending the sovereignty of one people (narod) on the whole territory of the Russian state, and, second, by doing so pushing the republics within the Russian Federation to ethnic cleansing. Both ways will explode the situation in the sphere of ethnic relations in Russia.”13 The presence of the non-Russian ethnic groups and the ethno-federal structure of Russia thus complicate the ethnic nation-building project just as it does the civic territorial one.

The third obstacle to the ethnic Russian project is the lack of agreement on who exactly is Russian. At first blush this may seem surprising, as the Soviet regime ascribed everyone an ethnic identity which was recorded in one’s passport, so there was a readily available option of defining Russianness by ethnicity reflected in Soviet and Russian passports in the 1990s.14 However, the prevailing understanding of Russianness at both the elite and the public level is broader than passport ethnicity. Among the public, as polls show, a linguistic and cultural definition...

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14 In Russia, passport ethnicity was abolished by a presidential decree in 1997. When Russia began issuing its new national passports in December 1997, these passports did not contain the ethnicity entry.
of Russianness prevails.\textsuperscript{15} Parliamentary hearings of the draft law “On Russian (\textit{russkie}) people” show that the Russian elites also disagree on who are \textit{russkie}. A particularly poignant disagreement is over whether Ukrainians and Belarussians are to be considered as such. The government-prepared draft defined \textit{russkie} people as “social-ethnic group united by origin, historical destiny, Russian national self-understanding, Russian language, culture, and customs” and stated that there exist “special ethnographic groups of Russian people exhibiting specificities of speech and culture.”\textsuperscript{16} This wording left unanswered the question whether Ukrainian and Belarussians belong to the Russian nation, and this exactly what the Russian nationalists and communists objected to.

For example, Communist leader Gennadii Zuiganov argued during the debate of the draft that “unification of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus is the question of survival. Russian people (\textit{russkii narod}) have three joint foundations: velikorosy, malorosy, belorusy.”\textsuperscript{17} An alternative draft prepared by the Aleksandr Sevastianov, co-chair of the National-Statist Party of Russia, defined Russian people “as a single ethnicity (\textit{etnos}) which is comprised of the following sub-ethnicities: velikorosy, malorosy, belorusy.”\textsuperscript{18} As of this writing, the draft law on \textit{russkie} people remains pending, and the question of the boundaries of the “true” Russian nation, and the Ukrainians and Belarussians’ place in it, remains.

\textit{Eastern Slavic nation}

The idea of Russia as an Eastern Slavic nation sidesteps the dilemma just discussed as it allows presenting the “true” Russian nation as a pan-ethnic nation encompassing all three Eastern Slavic peoples without answering

\textsuperscript{15} To love Russia and view it as a homeland, to know and love the Russian culture, and to have Russian as a native language were the top three characteristics necessary for a Russia according to a 1995 public opinion poll cited in Tolz 1998b, p. 1015. In a December 2006 VTSIOM poll, being “brought up in the traditions of Russian culture” was the most popular option chosen by the respondents in answer to the question “who would you consider Russian (\textit{russkii})” (VTSIOM 2006).


\textsuperscript{18} Text available at \url{http://rusvladimir.narod.ru/prorus-s.htm}, accessed 1 October 2006.
the question whether the three are separate ethnicities or all part of one ethnicity. The Eastern Slavic conception of
the nation also has a long “usable past,” as both the tsarist-era and the Soviet-era official historiographies promoted
the idea that the Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians are three “branches” of the same people, or “brotherly
peoples” originated in the medieval state of Kievan Rus,\textsuperscript{19} and there remains strong popular support for this idea.\textsuperscript{20}
At the same time, the idea of Russia as an Eastern Slavic nation is fraught with some of the same difficulties as the
idea of Russia as a nation of \textit{russkie}, namely, the place of non-Slavic groups in the nation and the ethno-federal
structure of the Russian Federation.

\textit{Russian-speaking nation}

The idea of the nation as a community of Russian-speakers may not be so evidently in conflict with ethnic
federalism as the idea of the nation as a community of ethnic Russians or Eastern Slavs, but even if the nation is
defined by language, the place of people with “unclear ethnic origin and physical appearance” remains (Popov
2006). As one newspaper summed up the dilemma, “if someone speaks Russian but is black, can this person be our
compatriot?” (Popov 2006). There is no consensual answer to this question in Russia, but most analysts conclude
that the category of Russian-speakers refers first and foremost to the Russian-speaking Slavs, and in particular to
those who self-identify with Russia and are politically loyal to Russia rather than to their state of residence

\textsuperscript{19} As Tolz notes, the nineteenth century Russian historiography maintained that Russians, Ukrainians and
Belarussians were three “branches of the Russian people” (\textit{narodnost}), while the Soviet formula of “three brotherly
Slavic peoples” acknowledged the greater separateness of Ukrainians and Belarussians from Russians. In the 1990s,
Tolz finds, the majority of nationalist intellectuals embraced the pre-revolutionary terminology rather than the

\textsuperscript{20} In a November 2005 poll, a whopping 81% of Russian respondents expressed the belief that Russian, Ukrainians,
and Belarussians are “three branches of one nation (\textit{narod}),” while only 17% believed that they are different nations.
The vision of the entire USSR as a true Russian state and all Soviet citizens as members of the nation is another discursive construct that has popularity, but it is also fraught with contradictions. Some contradictions are conceptual and ideological. As Tolz notes, two ideological traditions that share the vision of the entire USSR as a true Russian state are the neo-Eurasianists and Soviet Communists, and while “there was a rough geographic congruence between the borders the Eurasianists envisaged for their “Russia-Eurasia” and those of the USSR,” the ideas of the Eurasianists and Soviet ideologues were distinctively different (Tolz 1998a, p. 273). The neo-Eurasianists see “Russia-Eurasia” as a separate cultural and historical entity, to the point of seeing the people of the former USSR belonging to a single anthropological entity (Tolz 1998a, p. 272). By contrast, Soviet ideologists and Russian communists “were more ready to recognize that the peoples of the USSR had different national identities” (Tolz 1998a, pp. 272-273).

There are also obvious practical challenges to the neo-Soviet nation-building project, and the same applies to all three ethnic projects (Russia as a state of ethnic Russian, of Eastern Slavs, or of Russian-speaking). All these projects extend the Russian nation past the borders of the current Russian state, and thus raise the question of Russia’s territorial arrangements vis-à-vis its neighbors. These images of the nation may have a long historical pedigree, but, as one author put it, they do not “help in solving one of the crucial problems of contemporary Russia—that of the boundaries of the political community.” (Morozov 2008, p. 174). The potential irredentism of these projects complicates their adoption as state policy. Officially acknowledging and acquiescing to the non-congruence between the national unit and the political units would require a painful psychologically recognition that Russia is indeed a “stump” of its “true” self.21 An alternative to acquiescence would be to try to make the political unit congruent with the perceived national one, which in turn necessitates an irredentist project fraught with many risks and uncertain prospects.

3. The homeland myths and government policies: from Yeltsin to Medvedev

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21 Russian communists as well as nationalists frequently refer to the current Russian Federation as a “stump” of the “true” Russia. For example, Gennadii Ziuganov as quoted in Pain 2009, p. 82.
Since none of the intellectual homeland constructs was easily convertible into state policy, the Russian
government was in a difficult position. In a thorough analysis of Russian state’s nation-building policies of the
1990s, Vera Tolz notes that all of the “homeland myths” had an impact on state policies, “with different concepts
dominating at different periods of time,” and further “competing with one another, often in the minds of the same
politicians, creating inconsistencies in their views” (Tolz 1998a, p. 289). Scholars have characterized Yeltsin-era
policies as having moved from an emphasis on civic rossiiskii nation-building in 1992, when known liberals such as
Yegor Gaidar and Galina Starovoitova held positions in Yeltsin’s inner circle, towards a more ethnic and imperial
conceptualization of the new Russian state as a homeland for the Russians and Russian-speakers throughout the
USSR as the communist and nationalist opposition gained strength and the liberals lost their influence in the
government (Breslauer & Dale 1997; Brudny 2001; Tolz 1998a). At the same time, studies also draw attention to
the contradictory and ambiguous nature of Yeltsin-era government policies, in particular to the confusion between
ethnic and civic discourses of nationhood (Brudny 2001; Morozov 2008; Morozov 2009; Tolz 1998a; Tolz 1998b;
Zevelev 2008). This contradiction was manifested in the tension between the stated objective of building civic
rossiiskaia nation and the defense of the ethnic constituency (Russians and Russian-speakers) in the Near Abroad
(Breslauer & Dale 1997), as well as in the federal elites’ use of the Russian Orthodox Church to legitimize
their power as they were talking about building a civic rossiiskaia nation (Tolz 2004, p. 165).

Contradictions and ambiguity between ethnic and civic nation-building agendas persisted into Putin and
Medvedev periods as well. On the one hand, Putin and Medvedev have rhetorically embraced the idea that the
people of Russia constitute a single rossiiskaia nation – more so than Yeltsin did, some argue. Thus, both Putin and
Medvedev received praise from Valerii Tishkov who contrasts their position with that of Yeltsin who only “timidly
spoke of the rossiiskaia nation as a task for the future” (Tishkov 2009b), while Putin, in Tishkov’s assessment, sees
“every reason to speak of the Russian people (rossiiskii narod) as a single nation (iedinaia natsia).” President

22 Brudny further emphasized that the executive elite’s embrace of any particular nation-building agenda has been
purely instrumental and dictated by the changes in the political balance of power rather than by intellectual
commitment to any one articulation of the nation.

23 Putin as quoted in Tishkov 2009b. The first manifestation of Putin’s commitment to the rossiiskaia nation project
was his programmatic article “Russia at the turn of the millennium” (Sakwa 2004, pp. 251-262) which appeared in
Medvedev has also talked about *rossiiskaia* nation, for example in his 2008 state to the nation address, although he used *rossiiskaia* nation interchangeably with *mnogonatsional’nnyi narod* (Medvedev 2008). This illustrates the dilemma discussed above: it remains unclear how *rossiiskaia* nation concept is different from the constitutionally-enshrined *mnogonatsional’nny narod* concept, and, perhaps even more importantly, whether the political actors see the two as distinct.

But even if Putin and Medvedev are more accepting of the *rossiiskaia* nation discourse than Yeltsin was, the ambiguity between ethnic and civic discourses of nationhood at the official level remains. Two manifestations of this ambiguity are particularly important. The first concerns the extent to which “ethnic nationalist discourse … creeps back into official policy statements” (Morozov 2008, p. 167). The second concerns the possibility that a civic nation project of Putin and Medvedev is in fact a neo-imperial project.

One illustration of “ethnic nationalist discourse … creep[ing] back into official policy statements” is the “Russian (*russkii*) project” launched by United Russia in February 2007.\(^{24}\) The ethnic undertones are suggested by the very name of the project – *russkii* rather than *rossiiski*. The timing is also suggestive. The project was launched on the heels of the fall 2006 anti-Georgian campaign which targeted ethnic Georgians, regardless of their citizenship, in the course of Moscow’s conflict with Tbilisi over the expulsion of Russian diplomats.\(^{25}\) The project was at least in part instrumental, being launched before the 2007 Duma elections with an intention to attract nationalist vote. United Russia aimed to take the initiative on speaking for the *russkie* from the nationalists who have grown into a vocal and increasingly powerful opposition to the Kremlin, especially after the liberal opposition was eliminated (Morozov 2008, p. 166). Indeed, Andrei Isaiev, member of the presidium of the United Russia General Council, confirmed that in launching its “Russian project” United Russia wanted to “destroy the monopoly of extremists and scoundrels to speak on behalf of the *russkie* people.” United Russia tried to distinguish itself from December 1999 when Putin was still prime minister and acting president of Russia. In it, Putin put the task of consolidating society around the common *rossiiskaia* idea on top of his political agenda.

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\(^{25}\) For details on this campaign, which the International Federation for Human Rights characterized as “campaign of discrimination on the basis of ethnic criteria conducted at the official level,” see International Federation for Human Rights & Grazhdanskoie sodeistvie 2007, pp. 29-43, 29.
the nationalists. According to Isaiev, unlike nationalists who “define Russianness (russkost’) by blood,” United Russia considered as russkie all those “who speak and think in Russian, who consider themselves belonging to the Russian culture” (Azarov 2007). United Russia’s definition of russkii is indeed more inclusive than that of ethnic nationalists, but it still leaves the question whether ethnic Russians are first among equals in the Russian civic nation - “twice Russian,” as was stated on one of the talk shows, the “tireless masters of the lofty fate” of Russia as a whole, as Surkov 2006 put it – with other ethnic groups figuring only as a “background mosaic to highlighting the greatness of the main protagonist.”

The argument that the Russian authorities are “drifting towards ‘imperial nationalism’” even as they talk about pursuing a civic nation project has been made most forcefully by Emil’ Pain (Pain 2009, p. 80). In addition to emphasizing that “authentic” civic nation-building can take place only within democratic polity, Pain also argues that official discourse during Putin and Medvedev promotes imperial “civilisational” rather than civic nationalism. Indeed, the idea of Russia as a unique civilization has been a common theme in speeches of top officials, and the civilization that is being referred to clearly extends past the borders of today’s Russia. Putin for example has talked about the “multimillion Russian (russkii) world which is, of course, much larger than Russia” (Putin 2007, also Putin 2001). Medvedev also spoke of a “civilisational role” Russia has performed “for millennium … over huge territory” (Medvedev 2008). Explaining the “Russian project” of United Russia, Isaiev spoke about Russianness being “the question not of blood, but of imperial mindset (samosoznania)” and “Russia being created on the model of the Roman Empire” (Azarov 2007). The head of the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill recently suggested that the concept “a country of the Russian (russkii) world” should be introduced, and that residents of

26 During a discussion of United Russia’s “Russian project” on NTV between the project head Ivan Demidov and Boris Nemtsov and Sergei Baburin, the talk show host asked Demidov if, as an ethnic Russian, he is “twice Russian” (dvazhdy russkii) – because he’s both an ethnic Russian and a member of Russian political nation, while non-ethnically Russian Nemtsov is not. “Diskussia o russkom proekte, zapushchennom “Iedinoi Rossiiie,” NTV, 11 February 2007, quoted after transcript available at http://www.nemtsov.ru/?id=705059, accessed 15 November 2009.

27 Oksana Karpenko, as quoted in Morozov 2008, 167.
these countries “should realize their common civilisational belonging and consider Russian world as their common supra-national project.”

One can debate whether this civilisational discourse that also portrays Russia as a historically unique example of multinationalism and tolerance indeed “serves merely as a fast-dissolving coating that makes it easier to swallow the pill of ethnic nationalism,” as Pain argues, but it is clear that the conceptual and practical dilemmas associated with each of the existing discourses of nationhood have not been resolved, and ambiguity and contradictions between ethnic and civic nation-building agendas and discourses at the official level continues. Since all available nation-building agendas in Russia are associated with significant conceptual and practical dilemmas, this is hardly a surprising outcome. What is surprising is that a legal solution to these persisting contradictions may be emerging, manifested in the law on compatriots (sootechestvenniki).

4. Legal ambiguity as a solution to Russia’s nation-building dilemma?

Compatriots as “us”

The law “On State Policy of the Russian Federation towards Compatriots Abroad” was adopted in May 1999, after several years of Russia’s efforts to legally introduce dual citizenship with other former Soviet republics failed, and was originally designed as a supplement to the dual citizenship strategy which had a potential to be converted into a stronger mechanism of Russia’s influence in the region (Zevelev 2008). For some time the law laid largely dormant, but in recent years the compatriots law is increasingly becoming the main legal instrument by which Russia defines the target of its polices in the post-Soviet region. The law defines compatriots as those “who were born in one state” and who “share common language, religion, cultural heritage, customs, and traditions,” as

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29 Pain supports this conclusion by emphasizing that “both nationalists and imperialists see the ethnic majority as the only potential subject for a revived empire” and that “the idea of political domination in Russia by ethnic Russians … is upheld by representatives of both trends.” Pain 2009, pp. 77-78.
well as their direct descendents, except “decedents of persons who belong to titular nations of foreign states.” The text of the law, as well as statements by Russian officials on just who the compatriots are, show how without conflict with the letter of the law compatriots can be defined as anyone from ethnic Russians to all former Soviet citizens. The compatriots law thus does not solve Russia’s nation-building dilemma, but instead legally institutionalizes the ambiguity of nation’s boundaries.

Ethnic definition of compatriots can be easily justified within the law. Many observers have argued that the law is primarily aimed at the Russian-speaking ethnic Slavs and that belonging to the compatriots is a matter of ethnic identity and language (Movozov 2008, p. 167; Zevelev 2008). The compatriots law was even called Russia’s “first federal legislative act limiting rights on the basis of ethno-cultural criteria” (Osipov 2004). Indeed, since the law defined compatriots by language, religion, and culture, the narrowest interpretation of the letter of the law would be to define only ethnic Russians who are Orthodox Christians as compatriots as they clearly fulfill all of the criteria set forth in the 1999 law. Ethnic definition of compatriots can also be found in official statements. For example, the Russian Federal Migration Service (FMS) press service has been quotes as saying that compatriots are “ethnic Russians who live in the CIS and Baltic states” (Tartuta & Kozenko 2005). Preference for ethnic Russian is also suggested by a sample application form for the compatriots resettlement program launched in 2006. While ethnicity and religion are optional categories, a sample form posted at the FMS website and filled in for a Vladimir Kuznetsov, resident of Kyrgyzstan, specifies his ethnicity as Russian and religion as Orthodox (Federal Migration Service of the Russian Federation 2008).

At the same time, the law can easily support linguistic rather than ethnic definition of compatriots. The text of the compatriots resettlement program notes that compatriots are “brought up in the traditions of Russian (rossiiskaya) culture, knowing Russian language.” The FMS officials have emphasized that compatriots

30 Further, according to a version of the same sample form contained in the FMS-issued memo to compatriots wishing to resettle to Russia (Federal Migration Service of the Russian Federation 2007, 15), there is no expectation that Vladimir Kuznetsov who was born in Kyrgyzstan in 1967 would know Kyrgyz, as he answers “no” to the question if he knows any foreign languages. The 2008 version leaves the “other languages” line blank.

31 State Program “On measures to assist in the voluntary resettlement of compatriots living abroad to the Russian Federation,” approved by Presidential decree No. 637 on 22 June 2006, available at: 
resettlement program is aimed at the former Soviet citizens competent in Russia and possessing professional skills. Thus, according to the head of the FMS Konstantin Romodanovski, compatriots are those “who have desirable professions, who know Russian language and who respect our traditions and culture” (Sas 2008).32

An even broader definition of compatriots – as Russians and non-Russians who had Soviet citizenship as well as their descendents, except descendents of the former Soviet citizens of the fourteen ethnicities who belong to titular groups of the newly independent states – can also be supported by the letter of the law, especially if these non-Russians know Russian and/or are Orthodox. The definition of compatriots in the law justifies exclusion of the post-Soviet generation of titular groups, although in practice such exclusion would be complicated by the difficulty of determining ethnicity in case of mixed marriages. Excluding the post-Soviet generation of Ukrainians and Belarussians in particular is also problematic for ideational reasons, as discussed above. This may be why one does not really find Russian officials advocating this particular interpretation of the compatriots law.

Most broadly, one could argue that all former Soviet citizens and their descendents are compatriots. Since just what constitutes common language, culture, religion etc is not specified in the law, potentially any of the languages, religions, or customs existing in the former Soviet Union could be interpreted as “common.” Whether decedents of the titular groups of foreign state should in fact be excluded is also potentially debatable. This exclusion is contained in Article 1.2 of the compatriots law that defines “compatriots aboard,” while article 1.1 that defines “compatriots” does not contain this exclusion. The definition of compatriots as all former Soviet citizens and their descendents is present in official statements and documents. Former President Putin, for example, has argued that the compatriots are “not legal category … but spiritual self-identification” (Putin 2001) – the criteria that any former Soviet citizen could claim to meet. In a similar vein, the Russian Foreign Ministry states that compatriots are “those who remain loyal to Russian language and culture, who feel spiritual connection with Russia, its successes and difficulties” (Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii 2006). In its recent explanatory letter on whom to consider compatriots for the purposes of higher education in Russia, the Ministry of Education stated unambiguously that compatriots are former Soviet citizens and their direct descendents (Ministerstvo obrazovania i nauki Rossiiskoi Federatsii 2009). Some observers have argued that the Russian authorities include in the category of compatriots “all of the non-titular groups living in the CIS and titular groups retaining their Soviet traits. The

32 Solodovnikov 2007 reports similar definition of compatriots by the Chairman of the Directorate on Compatriots of the FMS.
post-Soviet generations of titular groups have become strangers for Russia" (Zevelev 2008). However, official statements on who the compatriots are do not always exclude “the post-Soviet generation of titular groups,” and at times include it explicitly.

Functionality of ambiguity

Because the compatriots law accommodates multiple definition of compatriots, it does not solve Russia’s nation-building dilemma discussed in the previous section as far as resolving contradictions associated with each of the five possible definitions of the “true” nation listed in Table 1 and/or committing the state to any one of these controversial definitions. At the same time, the compatriots law solves Russia’s nation-building dilemma for the government by giving the government a way out of this dilemma. By defining the group the state formally recognizes as its “us” ambiguously in the law, the government can avoid the emotionally charged debates on the question of nation’s boundaries while at the same being in a position to pursue a broad range of policies in the name of compatriots.

Two specific ways in which the ambiguous definition of compatriots is convenient are particularly worth highlighting. First, it gives a legal basis to a wide range of Russia’s policies in the former Soviet space since many different policies can be presented as protecting the interests of compatriots. To illustrate, there is much debate within Russia about whether Russia’s interests are best served by the Russians and Russian-speakers staying in the former Soviet republics (because this can potentially give Russia leverage over these states), or by them moving to Russia (to compensate for Russia’s demographic crisis and population decline). As Viktor Alksnis put it during a debate of migration policy objectives in the Duma in March 2006, “today we do not know what is Russia, and whether we should be stimulation the growth of repatriation of Russians living in Ukraine, or is it better if they stay there, because, by helping them leave Ukraine, we are helping to separate (ottorgat’) Ukraine from Russia.”33 In a similar vein, Konstantin Zatulin, head of the CIS Institute, has argued that “if Russians leave Kazakhstan, it will

become an ordinary Asian country. If Russians leave Ukraine, it will definitively (окончател'но) turn to the west” (Tartuta & Kozenko 2005).

During most of the post-Soviet era, even though Russia received many migrants from the CIS, Russian leadership did not formally encourage such migration and spoke of the need to have the interests of compatriots protected in their states of residence. More recently, the thinking has been changing. In his May 2006 annual address to the Russian parliament President Putin declared “attracting compatriots from abroad” a “priority” of migration policy (Putin 2006). In June 2006, government program “On Voluntary Resettlement of Compatriots to Russia” was approved by a presidential decree; in December 2006 amendments to the law “On Legal Status of Foreign Citizens in the Russian Federation” gave participants of the compatriots resettlement program the right to work without work permit; and in October 2008 amendments to the citizenship law that gave participants in the compatriots resettlement program simplified access Russian citizenship entered into force (Grafova & Gritsiuk 2008).

Secondly, reliance on “compatriots” category to define the target group of state polices gives Russia greater flexibility than the reliance on other categories, such as ethnicity, language, former Soviet citizenship, citizenship of particular post-Soviet states, or even Russian citizenship. For example, a more ethno-cultural definition of “us” would make it difficult for Russia to justify its involvement in the regions outside its borders where ethnic Russians do not live in compact settlements, such as Abkhazia, Ossetia, and Transdniestria (Zevelev 2008). Since many people in these three territories obtained Russian citizenship in the 1990s, in these particular cases Russia could (and did) use the citizenship status of the population to justify its “special interests” in these areas. But with citizenship acquisition becoming more difficult following the adoption of the new citizenship law in 2002 (Tolz 2004, p. 172), in the future a possible target group of Russia’s interests may not have Russian citizenship, but any post-Soviet group can still be easily presented as “compatriots.”

The history of amendments to the law on the legal status of foreigners illustrates how using “compatriots” terminology gives the government more leverage than using other categories. Amendments to the foreigners law that were adopted in July 2006 were discussed in March 2006, before Putin’s May 2006 annual address and before

34 The amendments exempted participants in the compatriots resettlement program from the 5 year residency requirement, acquisition of permanent residency permit, and proof or a legal source of income and knowledge of Russian language.
the adoption of compatriots resettlement program in June 2006. The July 2006 amendments eased residency registration requirements for citizens of states which have visa-free agreements with Russia (which included all former Soviet republics except the three Baltic states, Georgia, and Turkmenistan). During the debate of these amendments in the Duma many MPs cautioned against seeing post-Soviet migration as a solution to Russia’s demographic problem. As one MP put it, by counting on migrants “with different mentality and different culture” Russia at the same time is “refusing the right to survive to russkii people, rossiiskii people.” If Russia counts on migrants to keep the population at its current level, the MP continued, “we will get a totally different country – culturally, ethnically, linguistically.”

In July 2006 the amendments were passed despite these objections, but following anti-Georgian campaign in the fall of 2006, in December 2006 the foreigners law was amended again, this time limiting the right to work without work permit not to all those from visa-free states who had temporary residence permit but only to those who were also participating in the compatriots resettlement program.

Defining compatriots as desirable migrants is expedient for two reasons. First, participants in the compatriots resettlement program are supposed to settle not anywhere in Russia but only the regions designated by the government. Twelve regions designated by the compatriots resettlement program as pilot regions are for the most part in strategic border areas and suffering most from depopulation, so limiting benefits to compatriots also potentially puts the government in control as to where within Russia migrants will be moving. So far this control has been ephemeral in practice since compatriots program has attracted much fewer participants than the government anticipated, but the potential for the government to direct migration flows is still appealing.


37 The government estimated that some 300,000 people will relocate overall, 100,000 of them in the first year (Tiazhlov 2006). By April 2008, however, only 1,300 people came (Sas 2008). By the end of August 2009, still only 14,894 compatriots and members of their families resettled to Russia. Federal Migration Service of the Russian Federation 2009, p. 30.
Secondly, and more to the point, limiting migration benefits to compatriots allows the government to control composition of migrants, including ethno-cultural composition if it wanted to. If the target group is defined by former Soviet citizenship or eligibility for visa-free travel to Russia, this gives no legal basis for differential treatment on ethno-cultural basis. But if compatriots are defined as the target group, then such differential treatment becomes possible. Moreover, the state can engage in such a preferential treatment without openly admitting to it.

As discussed above, the definition of compatriots contained in the 1999 law allows treating ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking ethnic Slavs as compatriots, and comments by some officials as well as sample application form for the resettlement program prepared by the FMS signal that ethnic Russians of Orthodox faith are indeed the preferred group. At the same time, this preference is not stated openly anywhere in the resettlement program or the law. As Zevelev observed, event though “it is clear that the notion of ‘compatriots’ applies first and foremost to ethnic Russians, … the Russian authorities refrain from mentioning this directly” (Zevelev 2008). This is a sound practical choice given the many contradictions and potential dangers the ethnic nation-building agenda is fraught with in Russia, as discussed above. Targeting state policies at compatriots allows giving preference to ethnic Russians (or other cultural groups, such as Orthodox Slavs or some other sub-group of the “Russian-speakers”) informally, without getting into an emotionally and politically charged debates on the “true” boundaries of the nation, ethnic Russian’s special place in the nation, or the boundaries of Russianness (russkost’).

At the same time, compatriots do not have to be defined ethnically. The fuzziness of the compatriots definition in the law allows selecting not by ethnicity but by, say, skills. FMS officials have argued that compatriots are those who “have desirable professional skills” (Sas 2008), who “have professions that are in demand in Russia – teachers, engineers, doctors” (Tartuta & Kozenko 2005, also Solodovnikov 2007). Currently there are plans to extend the compatriots resettlement program to several skills-based categories, such as business entrepreneurs, highly skill workers, and students receiving higher education in Russia.\(^{38}\) Thus, the compatriots law could be applied to follow President Medvedev’s instructions from his latest state to the nation address: “instead of muddled actions dictated by nostalgia and superstitions, … [to] conduct smart foreign and domestic policy, dictated purely by pragmatic goals” (Medvedev 2009).

5. Conclusion

This study has argued that the nation-building dilemma Russia faces does not lend itself to any easy or short-term solution. All five main nation-building alternatives present in today’s Russia are fraught with significant dilemmas and contradictions, making the adoption of any one of them as state policy problematic. In this situation, I further argued, institutionalization and legalization of ambiguous definition of Russia’s “us” manifested in the compatriots law may be the only politically feasible, and also the most pragmatic, solution that serves a functional purpose. Scholars have noted how already in the 1990s Russia’s ruling “centrist” elites “purposefully gave vague answer to the question whether Russian nation is ethnic or civic [and] benefited from this ambiguity.”39 A new trend that has been gaining momentum over the past decade is the legalization of this vagueness. First established in the 1999 compatriots law, in the following years the government has been increasingly relying on this law when defining the “us” of the Russian state.

The definition of compatriots in the law is vague enough to allow in practice defining compatriots by a virtually infinite combination of ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural, and/or professional characteristics. This flexibility serves a functional purpose as it allows Russian policymakers a broad room to maneuver. They can target on a variety of sub-groups of the former Soviet citizens as “compatriots” and can pursue policies that fall in a broad range from ethnic to civic to neo-imperial without committing to any one of the associated discourses and without resolving the ambiguities and contradictions associated with each of the existing nation-building projects.

The ambiguity on the question just who are the compatriots is likely to continue. Amendments to the compatriots law currently under discussion give an even more ambiguous definition of compatriots than the one contained in the 1999 law. According to one of the members of the interministerial working group on amending the compatriots law, the working group agreed to define compatriots as “people living outside the border of the Russian Federation who made a free choice in favor of spiritual and cultural connection with Russia and who usually (kak

39 Specifically, Brudny argued that “using ethnic definition (russkie) allowed the ruling elites to interfere in the affairs of former Soviet republics under the pretext of defending compatriots,” while “civic interpretation of the nation (rossiiane) served as a weapon against the leaders of ethno-territorial formations within the Russian Federation.” Brudny 2001, p. 98.
pravilo) belong to ethnicities which have historically lived on the territory of the Russian Federation” (Grafova 2009). The ambiguity may also be further perpetuated by the elimination of the provision on compatriot identification card from the law. The 1999 law contained such a provision although no compatriot identification cards were ever issued (Chepurin 2009), and the foreign ministry is now trying to eliminate the provision on compatriot identification cards from the new edition of the law all together (Grafova 2009). The search for the national idea in Russia is far from over, but the ruling elites may have found a way to postpone, potentially indefinitely, resolving the vexing contradictions associated with this process.
References


Federal Migration Service of the Russian Federation (2007) 'Pamiatka sootechestvenniku, prozhivaushchemu za rubezhom i zhelaushchemu dobrovol'no pereselitsia v Rossiiskuiu Federatsiiu'.


Table 1. Alternative definitions of the Russian nation

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<th>Potentially irredentist</th>
<th>Potentially threatens territorial integrity of the Russian Federation?</th>
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