

## **(In)secure Russianness: Identity narratives of Russian ethnonationalist intellectuals prior to and during the war in Ukraine (2010-2024)**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the identity narratives developed by Russian ethnonationalist intellectuals on the eve of and during the war in Ukraine, which effectively began in 2014 and was resumed by the Kremlin in 2022. Drawing on literatures in nationalism studies and critical security studies, the article shifts the focus from state-centric approaches to the examination of a marginalised group of non-state actors pursuing the goal of a “Russia for ethnic Russians” [Россия для русских]. These actors are considered ideological entrepreneurs, whose writings have contributed to transforming “Russianness” [русскость], including its meaning and boundaries, into a field of symbolic struggle. Ethnonationalists’ identity narratives, marked by a pronounced sense of victimhood, did not allow for the establishment of a stable national self-identity prior to Russia’s war against Ukraine. The war has deeply affected these narratives, but its effects have proved to be quite different. Unlike the 2014 Ukraine crisis and the Donbas war, which reinforced feelings of identity uncertainty, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has become a source of ontological security in the ethnonationalist imaginary. Since 2022, the ethnonationalism that seeks to build a homogeneous nation has largely merged with Putinism. However, doubts over the outcome of the war in Ukraine and persistent ethnic tensions within Russian society could trigger renewed identity insecurity among Russian ethnonationalists and cause them to break with the Kremlin’s line once again.

**Keywords:** ethnonationalism, national identity, ontological security, war, Russia

### **Résumé**

Cet article analyse les récits identitaires développés par des intellectuels ethnonationalistes russes à la veille et pendant la guerre en Ukraine, qui a *de facto* commencé en 2014 avant d'être relancée par le Kremlin en 2022. S'appuyant sur des travaux en études du nationalisme et en études critiques de sécurité, l'article déplace l'attention des approches centrées sur l'État vers l'examen d'un groupe marginalisé d'acteurs non étatiques poursuivant l'objectif d'une « Russie pour les Russes ethniques » [Россия для русских]. Ces acteurs sont considérés comme des entrepreneurs idéologiques, dont les écrits ont contribué à transformer les significations et les frontières de la « russité » [русскость] en un champ de lutte symbolique. Les récits identitaires des ethnonationalistes, marqués par un profond sentiment de victimisation, n'ont pas permis d'établir une identité nationale stable en amont du conflit russe-ukrainien. Si la guerre a profondément affecté ces récits, ses effets ont été variables. Contrairement à la crise ukrainienne de 2014 et à la guerre du Donbass, qui ont renforcé le sentiment d'incertitude identitaire, l'invasion à grande échelle de l'Ukraine est devenue une source de sécurité ontologique dans l'imaginaire ethnonationaliste. Depuis 2022, les ethnonationalistes en quête d'une nation homogène se sont largement ralliés au régime de Poutine. Cependant, les doutes quant à l'issue de la guerre en Ukraine et les tensions ethniques persistantes à l'intérieur de la Russie pourraient raviver le sentiment d'insécurité identitaire chez les ethnonationalistes russes en les poussant à rompre une nouvelle fois avec la ligne du Kremlin.

**Mots-clés :** ethnonationalisme, identité nationale, sécurité ontologique, guerre, Russie

## Introduction

In March 2024, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow declared that “Russian nationalism does not exist in nature.”<sup>1</sup> Ironically, this statement contrasts with the “instructions” [наказ] that the World Russian People’s Council, a para-ecclesiastic organisation chaired by Kirill, issued to the Russian political authorities on the same day. This document referred, *inter alia*, to Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine as “a new stage in the national liberation struggle of the Russian people [русского народа] against the criminal Kyiv regime and the collective West behind it.”<sup>2</sup>

Although factually wrong, the Patriarch’s denial of the existence of Russian nationalism is symptomatic from a semantic point of view, as only a few figures in contemporary Russia whom an outside observer could reasonably call “nationalists” [националисты] would self-identify as such. This means two things. First, self-proclaimed nationalists label themselves with a term that has mainly negative connotations and has been used in dominant political rhetoric as a stigma to discredit opponents. By the same token, they seek to rehabilitate this label, which is an integral part of their group identity, in the face of official “patriotism,” which Putin’s regime has consistently presented as a civic duty (Fediunin 2023b). Today, one cannot engage in official Russian politics without identifying oneself as a “patriot” [патриот]; similarly, one is excluded from politics if self-identifying as a “nationalist” – unless you are Vladimir Putin, who has publicly described himself as Russia’s “biggest nationalist” (Laine 2021).<sup>3</sup> Consequently, self-proclaimed nationalists have no political representation and usually oppose Putin’s rule. Defending their group identity, as well as the ideas and values associated with it, comes at the cost of marginalisation.

Second, marginalised nationalist actors explicitly reject the official vision of the Russian nation, or civilisation, as “multiethnic and multiconfessional” (Fediunin 2022; Blakkisrud 2023) in favour of an exclusionary, ethnicity-based approach. Putin and his inner circle are statists, not nationalists in the purely ethnic sense of the word – that is, those who identify with, and are loyal to, a nation defined as a group of people who share a myth of common ancestry (Connor 1994). Statism, not ethnonationalism, is also characteristic of radical “patriots” who advocate the restoration of the Russian (or Soviet) empire but remain loyal to the Kremlin. These include members of the Izborsky Club [Изборский клуб], founded in 2012 under the chairmanship of Alexander Prokhanov (born 1938), a key figure in pro-Soviet imperial nationalism (Faure 2025), and members of the Tsargrad Society [Общество “Царьград”], created in 2015 by media mogul Konstantin Malofeev (born 1974). The latter proclaim themselves the heirs of pro-monarchist nationalists of the early twentieth century, known as the Black Hundreds [чёрносотенцы] (Laruelle 2025).

The focus of this article is on a marginalised group of ethnonationalists whose vision of the national community is ethnocentric and who pursue the goal of a “Russia for ethnic Russians” [Россия для русских]. For these actors, their own – Russian – “ethnic or national tradition is especially valuable and needs to be defended at almost any cost” (Hastings 1997, 4), including by establishing hegemony over non-Russian minorities and traditions. Moreover, they adhere to an ideological doctrine based on nationalist arguments that not only postulate the existence of a distinct nation and the necessity of national independence, but also demand that the “interests and values of this nation take priority over all other interests and values” (Breuilly 1993, 2), including those of the state. Indeed, for Russian

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1 “Выступление Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на внеочередном соборном съезде Всемирного русского народного собора” [Address by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the extraordinary conciliar assembly of the World Russian People’s Council], 27.03.2024, *Московский Патриархат*.

2 “Наказ XXV Всемирного русского народного собора ‘Настоящее и будущее Русского мира’” [Resolution of the XXVth World Russian People’s Council ‘The Present and Future of the Russian World’], 27.03.2024, *Московский Патриархат*.

3 See also “Путин назвал себя ‘самым большим националистом в России’” [Putin called himself ‘the biggest nationalist in Russia’], 24.10.2024, *Интерфакс*; “Путин назвал себя самым эффективным националистом” [Putin called himself the most effective nationalist], 18.10.2018, *РБК*.

ethnonationalists, the Russian Federation is not – or, at least, was not before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – a “true” nation-state for the country's dominant ethnicity, that is, the ethnic Russians [русские]. They consider the state “too multinational” and not sufficiently concerned with their group interests and culture. Instead, they propose establishing an “ethnic” or “national democracy,” which would transform ethnic Russians into “masters of their own country.”

More specifically, the article explores the identity debate among Russian ethnonationalist intellectuals on the eve of and during the war in Ukraine, which effectively began in 2014 (initially as a delegated war) and was resumed by the Russian leadership in 2022 (Hauter 2023). The main question I seek to answer is this: how has the war in Ukraine – and its successive stages – altered previously established ethnonationalist narratives about Russianness? I argue that the change in the ethnonationalist narratives towards the Russian state occurred at the time of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, not in 2014.

To answer this question, I use a theoretical framework linking nationalism to ontological security, which is presented in Section 1. Section 2 offers an overview of the ethnonationalist intellectual milieu in contemporary Russia and presents the data and methods used. Sections 3-5 provide an analysis of Russian ethnonationalists' identity narratives, focusing on three main aspects: the imaginary of a Russian identity under threat (Section 3) and the universe of its Others and enemies (Section 4) are considered for the periods 2010-2013 and 2014-2021 together, while the reconfigurations brought about by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine are explored in Section 5. The concluding remarks offer a brief summary and outline potential future developments.

## **1. Nationalism, identity narratives, and ontological (in)security**

The notion of collective identity, redefined as “national,” is central to nationalism and answers the question: who are we? (Smith 1991; Motyl 2010). As Eriksen (2010, 134) argues, “Like other ethnic identities, national identities are constituted in relation to *others*; the very idea of the nation presupposes that there are other nations, or at least other peoples, who are not members of the nation.” The divide between in-group and out-group members – “us” versus “them” – therefore lies at the heart of national(ist) relations: “We-ness demands otherness. There is no we that is not limned off from others” (Neumann 2018, 351). However, national identity differs from ethnic identity, although most forms of nationalism are ethnic and based on the exclusion of non-nationals (Connor 1994; Eriksen 2010). Historically, descriptions based on ethnicity have been descriptions of Others by non-members or outsiders. In contrast, national narratives refer to the construction of meaning for one's own group and from within. “If ethnicity is an identity for the Other, then nationalism is an identity for the Self” (Neumann 2018, 363; cf. Connor 1994, 103). In this article, I address a particular variety of identity narratives, namely those produced by contemporary Russian ethnonationalist intellectuals speaking on behalf of their own national group about that very group, that is, ethnic Russians.

National identity narratives recognise some groups (including one's own) as nations and others as “mere” ethnic groups lacking full subjectivity. In terms of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), these narratives primarily seek to stabilise a coherent, or homogenised, self-concept and to secure the best possible status for their national community in relation to out-groups: “the more stable and immutable group status is, the more secure collective identities are” (Sharafutdinova 2020, 26). This spotlights the intrinsic link between national identity and security, since Otherness – usually territorial (for example, internal minorities or external groups) but also temporal (former incarnations of the Self) – is just as necessary for the formation of a national Self because it constitutes a (potential) threat (Neumann 2018). Just like states and individuals, national group representatives strive to maintain a strong and stable sense of Self, that is, ontological security: “Actors are viewed as ontologically secure when they feel they have a sense of biographical continuity and wholeness that is supported and

recognised in and through their relations with others" (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017, 4). Disrupting these representations and relationships generates uncertainty and insecurity.

Overall, the ontological (in)security related to national identity stems from a continuous process of self-assertion and the perceived stability of the group's status with regard to (evolving) Others. It is worth noting that a potential threat to that status does not have to be "objectively" real, as it is constructed through speech acts that transform a "simple" issue into a security issue that is presented as a threat (Buzan et al. 1998, 23-26). A threat may be framed as existential if it is seen to jeopardise the very existence of the actor – a state, society, group or individual: here, the national group. A perceived threat to the latter often fuels claims of victimhood; such claims, made by its representatives – here, ethnonationalist intellectuals – play a key role in (re)shaping identity narratives across time and space (Lerner 2020). As "[v]ictimhood embodies the declaration that a group or individual has suffered wrongs that must be requited" (Horowitz 2018, 553), victimhood national(ist) narratives describe a national Self as being a victim of hostile Others, whether domestic or external.

In times of serious upheaval, such as a war, national identity usually becomes increasingly insecure in the face of existential threats. In wartime, some Others become enemies. At the same time, war creates a "mobilisational" context which may have securitising effects, particularly in terms of the rise of national consciousness (through mass mobilisation) and the trivialisation of nationalist ideology and rhetoric (through propaganda) (Hall and Malešević 2013; Lohr 2014; Hutchinson 2017). Similarly, war profoundly affects identity narratives, that is, how people talk about the national community and its (in)secure status. Russia's war on Ukraine is undoubtedly one such major shock, as it implies a redrawing of Russia's territorial and cultural boundaries (Knott 2023).

Although I assume that national identities are enduring, I also support the view that they may change "over time and in response to both external stimuli and internal realignments" (Motyl 2010, 70). For instance, they are to some extent mutable and can be "revived" by intellectuals, who act as ideological entrepreneurs. Intellectuals have always played a central role in shaping national consciousness and "reinventing" the nation as a unique culture, often acting *against* the state (Kennedy and Suny 1999; Hutchinson 2005). Contemporary Russian ethnonationalist intellectuals are precisely such entrepreneurs, and their writings have contributed to transforming narratives of Russianness [русскость], including its meaning and boundaries, into a field of struggle or "zone of conflict" (Hutchinson 2005). In early twenty-first-century Russia, this field of struggle is structured around dominant and alternative representations of Russianness. Dominant representations are produced and disseminated by President Putin and members of his administration, that is, actors who construct official representations of the national community, redefined as a civilisation (Blakkisrud 2023). Alternative representations are put forward by para- or non-state actors. The para-state actors include the aforementioned Russian Orthodox Church (Rousselet 2022; Kolstø and Kolov 2024), the Izborsky Club, and the Tsargrad Society, but also the loyal, or "systemic," opposition, notably Gennady Zyuganov's Communist Party (KPRF) and the late Vladimir Zhirinovsky's misleadingly named Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). The non-state actors involved are ethnonationalists (Laine 2017; Laruelle 2018; Fediunin 2024). In this article, I focus on the producers of ideas rather than the "practitioners" of ethnonationalism, such as those who participated in radical opposition movements like the Movement against Illegal Immigration [ДПНИ] and the "Russians" [Русские]. These movements, which promoted a firm anti-immigration agenda inspired by the European radical right and advocated the "ethnic solidarity" of the dominant group, were banned on account of their "extremism," in 2011 and 2015 respectively. This was a result of the regime's increased repressive strategy against non-state nationalist movements, some members of which practised vigilante violence targeting ethnic and sexual minorities (Laryš 2019).

Examining Russian ethnonationalist narratives, both prior to and during the Russo-Ukrainian war, helps shift the focus away from state-centric approaches, which analyse Russia's ontological (in)security through the study of state figures, namely Vladimir Putin and his regime (Sharafutdinova 2020; Prina 2024). For instance, I will show that ethnonationalist intellectuals promoted their own victimhood narratives that do not coincide with the Kremlin's promotion of "Russia's insecure, victimized collective status associated with the 1990s." (Sharafutdinova 2020, 27).

## 2. Russian ethnonationalists and their identity narratives: Data and methods

To explore the ethnonationalist perspectives on Russianness, I undertake a qualitative study of selected texts produced by a set of Russian intellectuals. Most of the texts are taken from the journal *Nationalism Issues* [Вопросы национализма, hereafter VN]. Founded in 2010, the journal was conceived as "a press organ of Russian nationalists intended for theoretical work" (Крылов 2010, 5). Thus, it aimed to be both academic – it was included in the [Russian Scientific Electronic Library database](#) – and politically committed to the Russian (ethno)nationalist cause. The most recent issue of the journal was published in December 2021, after several years of financial hardships. For 2022 onwards, I rely on texts published on the website of the Political News Agency [Агентство политических новостей, hereafter APN]. This is one of the oldest nationalist online platforms and, moreover, APN has links to VN: Konstantin Krylov (see below) was the editor-in-chief of both VN and APN for many years, and most articles published in VN were reposted on the APN website, usually as preliminary or shortened versions. APN is also affiliated with the Institute for National Strategy founded by Mikhail Remizov (see below).

The dataset comprises thirty-seven texts published in VN and eleven from APN, selected based on the abstracts (where available) and a surface reading of the texts themselves in search of references to national identity, that is, Russianness (see [Table 1](#)).

| Time period | Source                                                            | Number of texts<br>(individual/<br>collective) | Individual authors<br>(sorted by number of texts)                                                                                                                          |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2010-2013   | <i>Nationalism issues</i><br>[Вопросы национализма]               | 11<br>(10/1)                                   | Krylov (3); Svyatenkov (3); Nemensky (2); Krupkin (1); Zhuchkovsky (1)                                                                                                     |
| 2014-2021   | <i>Nationalism issues</i><br>[Вопросы национализма]               | 26<br>(23/3)                                   | Krylov (4); Nemensky (4); Sevastyanov (3); Kildyushov (2); Sergeev (2); Svyatenkov (2); Brusilovsky (1); Prosvirnin (1); Solovey (1); Pavlov (1); Krupkin (1); Khramov (1) |
| 2022-2024   | <i>Political News Agency</i><br>[Агентство политических новостей] | 11<br>(11/0)                                   | Khramov (3); Sevastyanov (3); Krupkin (2); Remizov (2); Kholmogorov (1)                                                                                                    |

**Table 1.** Selected ethnonationalist texts related to Russianness

When selecting the authors, I was guided by their initial involvement in the creation of VN. Although all of them at some point contributed to the journal, they may be divided into three groups:

1. VN editorial staff and prominent authors who distanced themselves from both Putin's authoritarianism and pro-Kremlin "patriots" and self-described as "national democrats" or "nats-dems" [национал-демократы, нац-демы]. They claimed to be pro-democratic and open to cooperation with Europe (and European far-right forces), all while embracing xenophobia and racism towards the "non-Slavic" populations (Laruelle 2014; Torbakov 2015).
2. Ethnonationalist allies who collaborated with and supported VN but had parallel trajectories.
3. Co-opted ethnonationalist (and conservative) intellectuals who supported the creation of VN

but distanced themselves from it out of loyalty to the Kremlin, while maintaining certain personal ties.<sup>4</sup> Claiming to be Russian “nationalists,” they have acted as intermediaries between “systemic” nationalists who support Vladimir Putin and oppositional ethnonationalist circles.

This table (Table 2) presents the list of authors and a short biography for each one.

| Group                                                       | Name and date of birth (and death if applicable) | Key functions and short bio                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| VN editorial staff and prominent authors                    | Konstantin Krylov<br>1967–2020                   | Editor-in-chief of VN, widely regarded as the leader of the “new” Russian (ethno)nationalism                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                                                             | Sergey Sergeev<br>1968–                          | Historian specialising in 19th-century Russian political thought and scientific editor of VN                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                                                             | Pavel Svyatenkov<br>1975–                        | Political journalist and author of articles in numerous official and opposition media outlets                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                                                             | Oleg Nemensky<br>1979–                           | Historian at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and expert at the Institute for Strategic Studies [РИСИ] under the Administration of the President of Russia                                                                       |
|                                                             | Oleg Kildyushov<br>1972–                         | Researcher specialising in German sociology and employee of the Centre for Fundamental Sociology at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow                                                                                                                       |
|                                                             | Valery Solovey<br>1960–                          | Historian and former professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations [МГИМО], known as a conspiracy theorist and media expert critical of the Putin regime                                                                                      |
|                                                             | Pavel Krupkin<br>1959–                           | Physicist by education and nationalist publicist                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|                                                             | Alexander Khramov<br>1989–                       | Paleontologist and activist with the “national democratic” movement                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                                                             | Alexander Zhuchkovsky<br>1986–                   | Journalist with nationalist and monarchist views who has been participating in pro-Russian separatism in Donbas since 2014                                                                                                                                         |
| Ethnonationalist allies                                     | Alexander Sevastyanov<br>1954–                   | Ethnonationalist ideologue since the 1990s who has authored numerous texts containing antisemitic ideas and who defends a biological-racial concept of the (Russian) nation                                                                                        |
|                                                             | Yegor Prosvirnin<br>1986–2021                    | Nationalist blogger who rose to fame in 2012 as the founder of the popular website Sputnik i Pogrom, which aimed to promote “intellectual nationalism” <sup>5</sup>                                                                                                |
| Co-opted ethnonationalists (and conservative) intellectuals | Yegor Kholmogorov<br>1975–                       | Expert for various organisations, including the ruling United Russia party, and media outlets in the 2000s; then presenter on Malofeev’s Tsargrad TV channel and on state-run TV channels such as RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik                           |
|                                                             | Mikhail Remizov<br>1978–                         | Editor-in-chief of APN (2004–2005); then member of various government commissions and, since 2019, senior executive at the State Corporation for the Promotion of the Development, Manufacture, and Export of High-Tech Products, or Rostekh [Ростех] <sup>6</sup> |

**Table 2. Selected ethnonationalist authors**

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Krylov was well acquainted with Kholmogorov and Remizov, all of whom had belonged to the “young conservatives” in the 2000s (Faure 2025, 127–169).

<sup>5</sup> Along with many other ethnonationalist resources, the website was blocked in 2017 by order of the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications and Mass Media, or Roskomnadzor [Роскомнадзор].

<sup>6</sup> It is Remizov’s lobbying that probably explains why APN was not blocked by Roskomnadzor.

The fact that all of the most prominent ethnonationalist authors are male reflects their ideological stance, which promotes “hegemonic masculinity” (Cornell 2005), that is, the dominant position of men, defined in this case as “white” or “Slavic.” This also implies that women are considered to occupy a lower status than men and that ethnic or sexual minorities are excluded. Their vision of national identity is thus male-centric (see Hudson et al. 2023, 125) and heteronormative (see Slootmaeckers 2019).

I divided the dataset into three periods to better assess the impact of the 2014 Ukraine crisis and Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 on ethnonationalist narratives in Russia: 2010-2013, 2014-2021, and 2022-2024 (see **Table 1**). For the period 2022-2024, several authors were excluded for various reasons: Krylov and Prosvirnin died in 2020 and 2021, respectively (Krylov had a stroke, and Prosvirnin fell out of his apartment window after suffering alcohol poisoning); Svyatenkov ceased covering topics related to Russian identity and focused on analysing the foreign policy of Western states; Sergeev grew disillusioned and openly distanced himself from nationalist circles and even from the idea of a Russian nation;<sup>7</sup> and so on. Overall, the dataset includes forty-eight texts. Forty-four of these were written by individual authors; the remaining four are collective works, including a manifesto of the unregistered National Democratic Party (published in 2012) and three “expert surveys” or “round tables” (two of which were published in 2014 and the third in 2016). Furthermore, in the analysis this dataset has been supplemented by some additional materials, mostly from nationalist media, for contextualisation.

To uncover the plethora of meanings (both latent and semantic) contained in the selected texts, I relied on the reflexive thematic analysis (TA) method (Braun and Clarke 2022). This method involves thoroughly exploring qualitative data and transforming it into meaningful insights. The flexibility of reflexive TA allowed me to engage in a mixed, inductive-deductive analysis of the dataset to identify patterns of meaning in ethnonationalist discourse and broader political discourses in contemporary Russia. My TA helped me unpack and interrogate these particular patterns, while allowing considerable freedom to apply the theoretical framework outlined above. I coded the texts from the dataset electronically using the MAXQDA 24 qualitative data analysis software package. The initial coding resulted in several hundred codes, which I reduced to a workable number using clustering. Following the recommendations of Braun and Clark (2022), I then established initial themes based on the code clusters, developed and revised the themes in relation to the coded data excerpts and the complete dataset, and identified and named the revised themes. The latter are summarised in **Table 3**.

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<sup>7</sup> “Don’t think of me as a Russian nationalist anymore. [...] There is no Russian nation, there is a herd of atomised social egoists, obeying the whip of the Supreme Leader [Putin], who is leading this herd towards a precipice... God forbid it should fall! And then, perhaps, under less extreme conditions, we will talk about the Russian nation again” (Sergey Sergeev, 04.04.2022. Facebook post, currently inaccessible).

| Thematic pairs                      | Themes                                                          | Characteristics                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| National identity formation         | 1. The meaning and current state of Russianness                 | Captures the ways in which Russian identity, including its markers and boundaries, are defined in a broader social and political context     |
|                                     | 2. Others/enemies: a victimhood nationalism                     | Outlines the group of Others and enemies who (potentially) hinder the assertion of Russian identity                                          |
| Russian nationalism in times of war | 3. The “deep crisis” of Russian nationalism                     | Relates to the divisions within the ethnonationalist movement, its unpreparedness and illusions, and its general condition in today’s Russia |
|                                     | 4. The “Ukrainian question” as central for Russia and Russians  | Details how Russians ethnonationalists perceive the war in Ukraine and its impact on Russia and ethnic Russians                              |
| A dismal state and a desired state  | 5. The counter model: the Russian Federation is not “our” state | Outlines the attitude of ethnonationalists towards the Russian Federation                                                                    |
|                                     | 6. The utopia: a Russian nation-state                           | Relates to the desired image(s) of the future from an ethnonationalist perspective                                                           |

**Table 3.** A summary of developed themes

All the developed themes are interconnected. Analytically, they can be grouped into three pairs: themes 1 and 2 relate to national identity formation (for “we-ness demands otherness”); themes 3 and 4 focus on perceptions of the current state of Russian ethnonationalist ideology and movement in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war; while themes 5 and 6 contain patterned meaning about the rejected past and (partly) present, as well as the desired future.

Since this article explores representations of Russian identity on the eve of and during the Ukraine war, I will primarily focus on the first thematic pair (that is, on national identity formation and Russianness defined in relation to Others and enemies), while the other two pairs will be drawn upon to situate the analysis in a broader context of nationalist debates and geopolitical changes. Although 2014 proved to be a key turning point for the nationalist movement, its influence on ethnonationalist narratives seems less significant than that of the Russian invasion of 2022. For the purpose of the analysis, I will examine the periods 2010-2013 and 2014-2022 together (Sections 3 and 4) before turning to the period 2022-2024 (Section 5).

### 3. A highly insecure national identity

Unlike many national identity narratives, the narrative constructed by Russian ethnonationalist intellectuals seems particularly marked by ontological vulnerability. The latter is a recurring motif and is directly linked to the status of the group to which the narrative refers, that is, ethnic Russians. Thus, ethnonationalist debates about identity are based on the paradoxical statement that this group is numerically dominant (about 80 % of Russia’s population) but is at a disadvantage relative to minorities who supposedly enjoy higher status. As a result, the “Russian brand” [русский бренд] (Крылов 2013, 34) seems unattractive not only to out-groups – those “six hundred and sixty-six” peoples (Просвирнин 2016, 9), according to a caustic nationalist saying referring to the “number of the Beast” – but, above all, to ethnic Russians themselves. “At present,” notes Krylov, “being [ethnic] Russian is disadvantageous – in the sense that openly acknowledging one’s belonging to the Russian nation brings a person nothing but inconvenience” (Крылов 2013, 27). Ethnonationalist activism aims precisely to change this perceived inferior status, responsible for the recognised “weakness” of Russian identity, in order to realise its “enormous potential for social cohesion” (Неменский 2013, 49).

### 3.1 Who are the true Russians? Struggle over identity inclusiveness

Although Russian ethnonationalist ideologues tend to explain the unpopularity of the Russian identity “brand” by the intrigues of hostile, “Russophobic” Others (see Section 4), one of the reasons for the insecurity is their failure to agree on clear criteria for Russianness. They all emphasise the predominance of the ethnic component (nation as *ethnos*, based on common origin and culture) over the political (nation as *demos*, based on citizenship and political values) – without setting them in opposition to one another (see Ремизов 2016). However, they may disagree on the criteria for belonging to the national community.

Sevastyanov, for example, has consistently argued for the racial nature of the nation, that is, the sense of “shared blood” (Севастьянов 2014, 104). Krylov adds to this: “We are white people, whether someone likes it or not.” Rejecting the “myth of the high assimilation capacity of Russians,” he points to their “unwillingness to biologically mix with strangers,” which has allowed them to remain a “genetically unified people” (Крылов 2013, 21-23). For Svyatenkov, on the other hand, the racial definition of Russianness is its “main flaw,” imposed on Russians by “external enemies.” He considers this definition to be overly restrictive, since it effectively limits Russianness to those “whose ancestors were exclusively Russian,” thus depriving many people of a strong national identity due to their mixed ethnic origins (Святенков 2014, 30).

Similarly, ethnonationalists have disagreed on the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). On the one hand, Church circles are said to have cultivated a “folkloric Russian identity [that] contrasts with present-day Russian identity” (Святенков 2010, 5). Moreover, ROC officials have been accused of engaging in “anti-national rhetoric” and of supporting Putin’s regime (Жучковский 2013, 15). On the other hand, as Nemensky emphasises, “The Russian Church (not for the first time in history) remains the only organisation that unites most of the Russian land across political borders within its canonical territory” (Неменский 2015, 154).

Finally, some dispute Nemensky’s assertion that “if a person’s native language is Russian, then he [sic] is objectively Russian” (Неменский 2014, 9). Thus, while recognising assimilated populations as ethnic kins, Prosvirnin gives particular weight to individual loyalty to the nation:

Anyone, regardless of [their] ethnic origin, who accepts the Russian language, Russian culture and the oath of allegiance to Russian national interests [...] can become a member of the Russian civic nation. [...] The clause about loyalty is key. If you were raised in Russian culture, speak Russian, but believe that all money should be collected and given to Kyiv, then you are not a member of the Russian nation [русской нации], but of some other nation (Просвирнин 2016, 13).

Since the early 2010s’, political developments have greatly influenced ethnonationalist debates on identity. Shortly after the radical-right rally in Manezhnaya Square in Moscow in December 2010, Vladlen Kralin, known as Vladimir Tor (born 1968), made a prediction paraphrasing Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: “A spectre is haunting Russia: the spectre of Russian political nationalism.” According to Tor, the protests, which targeted both the Putin regime and North Caucasian minorities, transformed opposition ethnonationalism into a mass political movement (Top 2011). Similarly, ethnonationalist intellectuals – who largely supported the anti-Putin protests of 2011-2012 and collaborated with liberal public figures, including Alexey Navalny (Laruelle 2014; Kolstø 2016b) – had high hopes for the rallies’ intellectual and political influence. For instance, Kildyushov saw them as an acceleration of the “process of disconnection” between the “Russian majority” [русское большинство] and the Putin regime. In his view, public opinion was beginning to realise that the Kremlin was acting in the interests of a “small minority” close to power, all while relying on “ethnic corporations” such as the Chechens. Kildyushov, a sociologist by profession, concluded that the electoral base of the “new” Russian nationalism was “virtually unlimited” (Кильдюшов 2011).

Hopes began to fade with the decline of opposition protests and the repressive response of the regime towards any form of public dissent, including nationalist (Laine 2017). Moreover, the 2014 Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine along with Russia's military intervention in Crimea and Donbas, which Russian nationalists called the "Russian Spring" [Русская Весна], caused a split in the (ethno)nationalist ranks (Horvath 2015) and ultimately led to widespread pessimism. This is evidenced by the materials of two "round tables" organised by VN in 2014 and 2016: the first round table was entitled "Is Russian nationalism in crisis?", and the second, "Does Russian nationalism have a future?", where adjectives such as "miserable" and "catastrophic" were used to describe its general condition (Русский национализм в кризисе? 2014; Есть ли будущее у русского национализма? 2016).

The ethnonationalist movement then split into two camps. Some – such as Dmitry Demushkin (born 1979), former leader of the neo-Nazi-inspired Slavic Union [Славянский Союз], shortened to "SS" [CC] in Russian (banned in 2010), and a leader of the Russkie movement (banned in 2015); and Vladimir Basmanov (born 1980), exiled leader of the Movement of Nationalists [Движение националистов] – cautiously supported Ukraine and opposed war between the two Slavic "white" peoples. Others, including all prominent VN authors, initially supported the "Russian Spring" – before growing disillusioned (Kolstø 2016a). However, their agenda was marginalised in favour of the Kremlin's rhetoric, which claimed to be protecting the population of the "Russian world" [Русский мир] in Ukraine. According to VN authors, the Ukraine crisis revealed the weak institutionalisation and unpreparedness of Russian ethnonationalists, who had no legalised party and lacked sufficient financial resources. As a result, they ended up excluded from politics and the official media. As Sergeev summed up,

[A] Russian nationalist is not a hero of his [sic] people, whom enthusiastic crowds are ready to carry on their hands, but a marginal figure acting at his own risk, whom many sympathise with, but few are willing to share even the slightest risk with. [...] To put it bluntly, being a Russian nationalist is not rewarding (Сергеев 2014, 34).

The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014 further reinforced the sense of ontological insecurity of Russian identity in comparison with Ukrainian identity. This feeling was clearly expressed by Svyatenkov. He argued that Russian national identity proved weak because it was divided between various regional identities (such as Cossacks, Pomors, Siberians, etc.) and "sub-cultures" (neo-pagans, sports fans, ultra-right-wingers ["правый движ"], neo-Nazis, etc.). Unlike the "inclusive" nature of Ukrainian identity, which is defined by proficiency in the Ukrainian language and a declaration of loyalty to the Ukrainian nation-state, Russian identity was, according to Svyatenkov, "exclusive" because many Russian nationalists still adhere to a racial, biological vision of the nation. For Svyatenkov, this situation was likely to amplify existing identity-based divisions across Russia, causing the Russian people to split into "several non-Russian or even anti-Russian nations." To avoid this worst-case scenario, Svyatenkov suggested accepting as Russians not only Russians "by origin" but also Russians "by acceptance": "Unless Russian identity becomes 'inclusive', the split in Russian identity will worsen, and not just on the Ukrainian issue" (Святенков 2014, 30-32; see also Goble 2016).

### 3.2 In search of a shibboleth: Distancing ethnic kins from out-groups

Having realised the extremely limited influence of ethnonationalists in Russian political developments by the mid-2010s, Krylov called for the creation of a common "national lay culture" [национальная субкультура]. In a 2018 text, he goes so far as to claim that "ordinary Russian people [have always] behaved like an amorphous mass, incapable not only of providing real assistance to the [Russian ethnonationalist] movement, but even of expressing banal sympathy" (Крылов 2018, 202). Krylov also cites the Ukrainian example and refers to the late Soviet period, when "there was a layer of people who demonstratively spoke Ukrainian, wore *vyshyvankas* [Ukrainian embroidered shirts],

ate Ukrainian food [...], celebrated Ukrainian holidays, and contemptuously rejected everything ‘Muscovite’ [москальскому]<sup>8</sup>” (Крылов 2018, 202-203; on symbolic ethnicity in late Soviet Ukraine, see Baumann 2025). Those people became the pillar of the Ukrainian national movement during perestroika and after Ukraine gained independence in 1991.

Similarly, Krylov argues, Russian nationalism should strive, prior to any political activity, to form a group of “nationally conscious laypeople” [национально-сознательные обыватели], or “good Russian people” [добрые русские люди]. In order to recognise each other as members of the same group and develop a group identity, these laypeople would need a distinguishing feature that sets them apart from outsiders, that is, a “shibboleth.” The best marker would be a national costume – in the Russian case, this would be a skewed collar shirt or *kosovorotka* [косоворотка] which was traditionally worn by male and female Russian peasants (at least since the fifteenth century, according to Krylov) and then adopted as a uniform in the Russian Imperial Army [гимнастёрка], before falling out of use during the Soviet period (Крылов 2018). This shibboleth would thus enable “conscious” Russians to distinguish themselves not only from the masses of non-Russians but also from the “de-nationalised,” or “Sovietised,” Russians – those people who do not have a clear ethnonational identity or those who prefer to call themselves “citizens of Russia” [россияне] and not “Russians” [руssкие] (see Lenton 2025). The wearing of the *kosovorotka* was taken up by young “national democrats” such as Roman Yuneman (born 1995), a blogger and founder of the Society.Future movement [Движение “Общество. Будущее”].<sup>9</sup>

Along with recognising members of their in-group and distancing themselves from out-groups, “conscious” Russians must also give practical expression to symbols of Russianness: they should “participate in Russian life and, as far as possible, refrain from participating in non-Russian life” (Крылов 2016, 3). In Krylov’s view, developing a national lay culture should be the first step towards the formation of a strong national self-identity, which will hopefully lead to the formation of a nation-state in which Russians will enjoy a dominant status (Крылов 2018, 210). Interestingly, Krylov’s scheme resembles Miroslav Hroch’s (1985) model of “national revival” among smaller Eastern European nations and its three stages: from the creation and spread of nationalist ideas by intellectuals to the formation of nationalist organisations and a mass popular movement leading to a nation-state.

Krylov’s reflections were not an isolated viewpoint. Under the dual impact of the observed crisis of Russian ethnonationalism and the war in Donbas, other intellectuals also spoke out in favour of infrapolitical strategies. Back in 2014, Sergeev called for ethnonationalists to refocus their efforts on activities related to the protection of rights and intellectual work. At the same time, he suggested considering the possibility of launching:

[A] backup option for the nationalist project – a form of nationalism for nationalists, that is, the creation of a kind of Russian “state within a state” based on the principles of a national diaspora with its own instruments of survival and lobbying. Perhaps this “sub-ethnic group” could eventually become the core of a new Russian nation (Сепреев 2014, 42).

After the blocking of the *Sputnik i Pogrom* website in 2017, Prosvirnin, also known under the pseudonym Yegor Pogrom, published a manifesto calling on supporters of ethnonationalism to create all kinds of “apolitical” structures that should both generate income and rely on hiring only ethnic Russians. For him, these small businesses, NGOs, and educational projects should serve as local meeting points, as active examples of in-group favouritism and ethnic solidarity, and as commercial networks

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<sup>8</sup> *Moskal’* [москаль, москали in plural] is a derogatory (or ironic) nickname given by the inhabitants of Ukraine and Belarus to Russians.

<sup>9</sup> See Игорь Карапулов, 04.02.2022. “[Не бойтесь косого ворота. Оппозиционер Юнеман, ‘Чёрная сотня’ и косоворотка](#)” [Don’t be afraid of the skewed collar. Oppositionist Yuneyman, the Black Hundreds, and the *kosovorotka*], *Ваши новости*.

that generate “cash flows” for “the national cause.”<sup>10</sup> This vision of nationalism based on “horizontal, peer-to-peer dynamics” (Kaufmann 2017) typically develops in an environment considered unfriendly or even hostile.

#### 4. Hostile Others: Russian victimhood ethnonationalism

As noted in Section 1, victimhood identity narratives are common to many groups and societies. Russian ethnonationalist narratives are no exception in this regard. In addition to a profound sense of vulnerability, they represent Russianness as being constantly under attack from forces seeking to subjugate or even destroy it. Most of the forces are perceived as systemic and structural rather than contingent. Therefore, from an ethnonationalist perspective, the existing political order is illegitimate because it reinforces the insecure status of ethnic Russians instead of minimising it.

Threatening forces can be classified according to two types of categories: internal/external and territorial/temporal. Based on the results of my reflexive TA, I have developed the following classification of Others/enemies as presented in the ethnonationalist texts analysed for the first two periods under scrutiny (2010 to 2013 and 2014 to 2021) (see Table 4).

| 2010-2021 | Territorial                                                                                                                       | Temporal      |
|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Internal  | The “anti-national” state/the Kremlin<br>Pro-regime “patriots”<br>Internal “Russophobes” (mainly liberals)<br>National minorities | Russia’s past |
| External  | Migrants / “non-natives”<br>Ukrainian nationalism<br>Ukrainians (as an ethnic/national group)                                     | Europe’s past |

Table 4. A typology of Russian ethnonationalism’s Others/enemies

Here, given my focus on ethnonationalists, I will exclude from the analysis pro-regime “patriots” and liberals, both oppositional and “systemic” (that is, economic technocrats within the state apparatus). Interestingly, ethnonationalists have tended to consider all these forces to be allies of the Kremlin and part of the ruling elite, despite the crackdowns that affected the liberal opposition after the protests of 2011-2012. I will also disregard internal minorities, migrants, and “non-natives,” as this topic has been covered previously (see Fediunin 2023a). Finally, since references to Europe’s past occur only sporadically in the dataset, I have opted to exclude this category as well.

##### 4.1 The “anti-national” state: the Kremlin’s “multinational autocracy” versus the ideal of “national democracy”

Despite the ambiguous position of co-opted ethnonationalist (and conservative) actors such as Remizov, Kholmogorov, and Nemensky, the Russian state in its current form – or, more precisely, up until 2022 – was largely recognised as a key Other for Russian ethnonationalist intellectuals. The Russian Federation, which Krylov derisively called “RF-iiia” [Эрефия] (Крылов 2006), does not coincide with the desired political entity, that is, a “true” national Russia. There are three main reasons for this.

First, the Russian Federation’s name does not refer to the majority ethnic group but speaks on behalf of a “multinational people” [многонациональный народ], to use the wording of the 1993 Constitution. From an ethnonationalist perspective, ethnic Russians are the only people who are not “a subject of nationalities policy” (Неменский 2012, 87). Despite their numerical predominance in Russia, they are

<sup>10</sup> Егор Погром [Просвирнин], n.d. [2018]. “[Что нужно сделать для возрождения русского национального движения?](#)” [What needs to be done to revive the Russian national movement?], *Sputnik i Pogrom*.

not constitutionally recognised as the sole state-bearing, or “titular,” nation [государствообразующая or титульная нация] (Крылов 2014). It follows that this state “refuses” to allow the majority group to be “masters in their own house” and “over other peoples” (Крылов 2011b). Similarly, it does not grant ethnic Russians any preferences in terms of access to state power, economic resources (for instance, the oil and gas industry), and culture, all while supposedly favouring non-Russians. As Zhuchkovsky colourfully puts it, “today’s Russian state is *not our* state. And for a Russian, being a patriot of a state such as the Russian Federation is as strange as being a patriot of, say, Papua New Guinea” (Жучковский 2013, 16). It is worth noting that in January 2020, shortly after Putin’s proposal to amend the Constitution, various ethnonationalist actors, including Krylov and Kholmogorov, published an open letter calling for the introduction of so-called Russian amendments [русские поправки]. Echoing para-state actors such as Zyuganov, Zhirinovsky, and Malofeev who were calling for the “state-bearing people” formula to be officially recognised, ethnonationalists proposed to rewrite the Constitution in a more systematic way in order to “secure the legal status” of ethnic Russians and “protect” their interests (Храмов 2020; see Fediunin 2023a, 7). The result was disappointing for the ethnonationalists: while the term “state-bearing people” appeared in Article 68-1 of the amended Constitution,<sup>11</sup> ethnic Russians were still not mentioned directly and received no legal privileges.

Second, Russians are seen as oppressed victims of an oligarchic autocracy which does not conform to the nationalist principle that “rulers and ruled hail from the same ethnic background” (Wimmer 2013, 1). In the early 2000s’, Krylov introduced the concept of *nerus’* [нерусь], which, with a conspiratorial undertone, refers to a coalition of forces united by their denial of Russianness – “a collection of peoples, classes, social groups, as well as professional, religious, and other communities seeking to subjugate, suppress, or even destroy [ethnic] Russians as a people and Russia as an independent state”.<sup>12</sup> According to Krylov, these forces came to power in the early 1990s under anti-communist and liberal slogans but merely perpetuated the policies of the Soviet regime, which is seen as the original – demonised – enemy of Russian ethnonationalism. As he colourfully states, “I believe that we are a tormented and terrorised but generally healthy people, whose only misfortune is that we were once taken over by real devils, the communists, who still rule us to this day” (Крылов 2017, 11).

Krylov’s *nerus’* resembles the notion of *noviop* [новиоп, новиопы in plural], introduced by conspiracy theorist and nationalist pundit Dmitry Galkovsky (born 1960). The latter term is derived from the notion of “new historical entity” [новая историческая общность], used to describe the “Soviet people” after Stalin’s death in 1953. According to Galkovsky, *noviopy* are a “hybrid” minority created by the Soviet regime, made up of people of non-Russian or “de-Russified” origin (including Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev); a ruling minority that continues to dominate and exploit the ethnic majority.<sup>13</sup> In one of his texts, Krylov accuses pro-Kremlin “patriots” of providing ideological justification for such exploitation of the people in the name of the state’s greatness and imperial mission (Крылов 2011a) – an idea that resonates with Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s ethnonationalist opposition to imperialism (Rowley 1997).

Finally, the Russian elites, or “the Kremlin,” have been systematically criticised for their alleged indifference to the situation of ethnic Russians as a divided people – referring to ethnically Russian populations living in the states of the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine. For instance, it is said that ethnic Russians have been unable to claim direct, swift, and unconditional access to Russian citizenship and effective repatriation services. The request to introduce such a right was one of the “Russian amendments” to the Constitution proposed in 2020.

<sup>11</sup> The new wording of the article states: “The official language of the Russian Federation across the whole of its territory shall be Russian, as the language of the state-bearing people which is an integral part of the multinational union of equal peoples of the Russian Federation.” See Государственная Дума, 03.07.2020. [“Новый текст Конституции РФ с поправками 2020”](#).

<sup>12</sup> Константин Крылов, н.д. [2003]. “[Нерусь](#)” [Nerus’], Энциклопедия Традиция.

<sup>13</sup> galkovsky [Дмитрий Галковский], 25.01.2012. [“751. Новиопы”](#) [751. Noviopy], LiveJournal.

As Khramov noted in 2016,

[T]he reunification of the divided Russian people is an indisputable strategic goal, but under the current [Putin] regime, all attempts to achieve it are doomed to failure or degeneration into an undignified bloody farce, as happened with the “Russian Spring” [in Donbas] (Есть ли будущее у русского национализма? 2016, 17).

A “democratic” and “just” Russian nation-state, as imagined by ethnonationalist intellectuals, would make it possible to correct this “anti-national” architecture and establish a form of democracy. However, the democracy that ethnonationalists, who call themselves “national democrats,” have claimed for Russia takes an overtly illiberal form, showing no regard for minority rights. It is in fact a variant of the “ethnic democracy” that has been practised both in Israel (Smooha 2002) and in India under the rule of Narendra Modi (Jaffrelot 2021), where the respective governments have granted privileges, *de jure* or *de facto*, to members of the dominant ethnic or religious group. The concept may also be applied to Latvia and Estonia, which, after gaining independence from the Soviet Union, did not automatically grant citizenship to Russian-speaking populations, making full citizenship conditional on a naturalisation process. With language policies aimed at reducing the teaching of Russian, this measure has been consistently denounced as discriminatory by Russian officials and (ethno)nationalists alike.

The 2012 Manifesto of the National Democratic Party, which has never been legalised, embraced the idea of democratic rule primarily for members of the “titular” national group. For instance, it states that the future Russian nation-state should “ensure the equality of all its citizens” while declaring the well-being of ethnic Russians to be “the purpose of the Russian state’s existence” (Манифест 2012). Sevastyanov gives the following definition of “national democracy,” which deliberately makes minorities non-citizens or second-class citizens:

[I]t is democracy for own’s one people [демократия для своих], or democracy limited on national grounds. [...] It is democracy operating within the framework of the nation. Let me emphasise this once again: the nation in our understanding is an ethnic nation and nothing else (Севастянов 2010, 119-120).

More broadly, the Russian ethnonationalist ideal of “national democracy” is close to the model of illiberal democracy in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, where the majority he claims to represent “has turned the state into its own private possession” (Kraestev 2016, 97). This is, indeed, the vision shared by most far-right movements across Europe: that of “a democratic nation-state [which] belongs to one ethnic group and [in which] other ethnic groups can only live [...] if they accept this group’s dominance” (Mudde 2007, 144). Unsurprisingly, Russian “national democrats” share with their European counterparts a rejection of multiculturalism and “leftism,” as these would lead to discrimination against ethnic majorities in the name of defending the rights of minorities, particularly those with an immigrant background [Крах мультикультурализма 2011].

In its failure to provide legal grounds for such a majority rule, the post-Soviet Russian state appears to ethnonationalists as an “wicked stepmother” seeking to turn ethnic Russians into “citizens of Russia” [россияне] and loyal “patriots” (Крылов 2016, 5). In a similar vein, Svyatenkov has spoken of a “fictitious state” in which the ethnic majority finds itself in the position of a “homeless, orphaned people” (Святенков 2013). As Sergeev summed up in 2016, Russian ethnonationalists must be clear-headed and declare “in a Schmittian way” that the “main ‘enemy’ is in the Kremlin, not in Ukraine” (Есть ли будущее у русского национализма? 2016, 15).

#### 4.2. Russia's past(s) as a collective trauma

Usually, the past serves as a key resource for constructing a sense of national Self. “For nationalists themselves,” writes Smith (1995, 18), “the role of the past is clear and unproblematic. [...] The task of the nationalist is simply to remind his or her compatriots of their glorious past, so that they can recreate and relive those glories.” But what if the past is considered not glorious but gloomy, even from a *nationalist* point of view? This is the fate of the Russian ethnonationalist intellectuals – contrary to the narratives promoted by the Putin regime and pro-Kremlin “patriots” who tend to glorify Russia’s historical greatness, all while bridging the gap between the Tsarist and Soviet “usable” pasts (Laruelle and Karnysheva 2020; Malinova 2025). Indeed, ethnonationalists tend to reinterpret the whole Soviet (and post-Soviet) era, or even longer, as a collective trauma – which is characteristic of victimhood nationalist narratives (Lerner 2020).

Among ethnonationalists, there is indeed a consensus regarding the “anti-national” and “anti-Russian” nature of the Soviet “internationalist” project, which echoes the writings of nationalist dissidents such as Solzhenitsyn or Igor Shafarevich (see Berglund 2012). Ethnic Russians are commonly portrayed as victims of the mass “de-nationalisation” practised by the Soviet state. This is evidenced by the tone of the articles written by regular contributors to VN in a 2017 issue dedicated to the centenary of the October Revolution (Октябрь 17-го 2017). The latter was unanimously described in terms of “catastrophe” and “tragedy.” Nemensky, who has worked as a historian at the Russian Academy of Sciences, explicitly associated the Soviet period with the planned destruction, both physical and spiritual, of entire sections of Russian society – the aristocracy, the peasantry, the Cossacks, the clergy, the intelligentsia. In his view, such a destruction would explain the “shameful condition” in which Russians found themselves by early twenty-first century (Октябрь 17-го 2017, 4-9). Svyatenkov even implicitly accused the Soviet state of genocide against the ethnic majority group, stating that:

The attitude of the Russian people [русского народа] towards the Soviet project should be roughly the same as that of the Jews towards the Holocaust, or the Chinese towards the Qing dynasty – that is, extremely negative. The Soviet “project” destroyed tens of millions of ethnic Russians [русских людей]. The enormous energy of an entire people was wasted in pursuit of incongruous goals of ideological domination over the world by communist false doctrine [коммунистического лжеучения] (Октябрь 17-го 2017, 16).

Ethnonationalist intellectuals have proved mostly sympathetic to the Tsarist past; many have even shown a sense of nostalgia towards it, considering the late Romanov Empire a nation-state in formation (see Брусиловский 2018; Delacroix Ostromoukhova and Khriakov 2024). Between 2019 and his death in 2021, Prosvirnin ran a YouTube channel called Czar.tv, which claimed to be monarchist and published a wide variety of content glorifying Tsarism.<sup>14</sup>

However, this narrative has not gone unchallenged. For instance, Sergeev, a historian by training, has argued that the Soviet state merely amplified the historical matrix already embedded in Russian history. He claims that the centralised and virtually unlimited power of the tsars forged a “servant people” [служилый народ] obliged to perform military or administrative service for the benefit of the state it did not control (Cepreev 2014, 2017). In other words, ethnic Russians, including serfs (unfree peasants, who were emancipated only in 1861 and 1866) but also urban Russian society, were systematically exploited and used as cannon fodder for centuries before the Bolsheviks came to power. Krylov, who was known for his sympathetic attitude towards the late Russian Empire and the last tsar, Nicholas II, in particular, considered Sergeev’s theory to be “false” (Крылов 2017). For his part, Solovey, then professor of history at MGIMO, opposed any form of “historical determinism,” arguing that “Russian society knows how to organise itself as soon as the state loosens its grip on the people” (Соловей 2017).

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<sup>14</sup> Many of the video streams, produced by Prosvirnin, are still available online ([YouTube](#)).

While the issue of the (Soviet) past and its legacy has long provided fuel for victimhood ethnonationalist narratives, a new source has emerged since 2014.

#### 4.3. Ukrainian nationalism and Ukrainians: From kindred people to enemy nation

In Russian (ethno)nationalist discourse, Ukrainian nationalism was traditionally viewed in a derogatory manner, labelled as “Galician,” “provincial,” “rural,” “petty,” and “Banderite”— a reference to Stepan Bandera, leader of the radical militant faction of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists in the 1930s-1950s. However, its ability to mobilise, demonstrated by a new generation of supporters during the Euromaidan revolution, took Russian nationalists by surprise (Уроки Майдана 2014). The “radical nationalist” and “neo-Nazi” movements such as Right Sector, as well as the authorities that came to power in Kyiv in 2014, were immediately framed as formidable enemies of Russian ethnonationalism. As mentioned above, the VN authors considered Ukrainian nationalism to be a reverse image of Russian ethnonationalism – a comparison seen as unfavourable for the latter (Уроки Майдана 2014; Есть ли будущее у русского национализма? 2016). Ukrainian nationalism and, more broadly, Ukrainian national emancipation have typically been described as a rejection of Russianness and, therefore, a violent manifestation of “Russophobia” – a narrative shared by virtually all Russian nationalist actors (see Fediunin 2024).

However, unlike radical “patriots” and official discourse, which tend to accuse the West of being Russia’s “real” enemy in its manipulation of Ukraine,<sup>15</sup> Russian ethnonationalist intellectuals have explicitly identified Ukrainians as an enemy nation. In their view, (many) Ukrainians have adopted the “anti-Russian” foundations of nationalism imposed by the post-2014 Ukrainian government and nationalist actors. Krylov put this very bluntly in 2016:

For Ukrainians, hatred of Russians is no longer just an idea, but a physical need. Browse the internet and you will see that if a Ukrainian does not curse or insult “Muscovites” [москалей] at least once a day (or better yet, cause them some real harm), he [sic] will feel unhappy and gloomy. There is nothing that can be done about this (at least in the foreseeable future); it is already ingrained in their DNA [программа уже впечатана в мясо]. The sooner Russians [русские] understand this, the better (Есть ли будущее у русского национализма? 2016, 4).

After 2014, therefore, most ethnonationalists concluded that the idea of national unity between the three Eastern Slavic peoples – Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians – which had been championed by several generations of Russian nationalists,<sup>16</sup> now was a thing of the past. In Nemensky’s words, “the concept of the triune Russian people is a product of early nineteenth-century Russo-German ethnography and, in its classical form, is no longer relevant.” Sergeev expressed this in a more radical way, stating “Ukraine is lost to the ‘Russian world’” (Есть ли будущее у русского национализма? 2016, 7, 14).

At the same time, the “anti-Russian” nature of Ukrainian nationalism was in parallel described as an “identitarian decease,” to borrow Nemensky’s words, meaning that the Ukrainians – and Ukraine as “southwestern historical Russia” – would have been artificially torn away from the Russian people and “mainland” Russia (Кильдюшов 2019, 122). According to Kildyushov and other Russian ethnonationalists, this has made the “Ukrainian question” central to Russia “for the whole twenty-first century” (Кильдюшов 2019, 124). The resumption of the war on a much larger scale only reinforced such an assessment.

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Александр Дугин, 19.09.2022. “[Начинается](#)” [It begins], *Изборский клуб*; “[Президент назвал врагом России Запад, а не Украину](#)” [The president called the West, not Ukraine, Russia’s enemy], 01.01.2024, *Интерфакс*.

<sup>16</sup> Krylov wrote in 2008: “Russian nationalists consider the Ukrainian and Belarusian peoples to be parts of a divided Russian nation [разделенной русской нации]. Reunification – in one form or another – is still possible. But it is only possible if [ethnic] Russians increase their attractiveness as a national community.” See Константин Крылов, п.д. [2008]. “[Семнадцать ответов](#)” [Seventeen answers], *Интелрос*.

## 5. Post-2022: Towards a “Russian turn”?

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launched in February 2022, has had a profound impact on the identity narratives of (the remaining) Russian ethnonationalist intellectuals. Perceptions of Others and enemies have shifted: while debates about the past have virtually disappeared, attention has instead focused on territorial enemies, both internal and external (see [Table 5](#)).

| 2022-2024 | Territorial                                                                                               |
|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Internal  | “National traitors”<br>National minorities                                                                |
| External  | Migrants / “non-natives”<br>Ukrainian nationalism<br>Ukrainians (as an ethnic/national group)<br>The West |

**Table 5.** A typology of Russian ethnonationalism's Others/enemies

Most importantly, there has been a dramatic change in the stance of ethnonationalist intellectuals, as many of them have now sided with the Kremlin, while seeing the West as a hostile force (see below). For example, Sevastyanov, one of Putin's most prominent ethnonationalist critics, has claimed that he voted for Putin in the March 2024 presidential elections and unequivocally states:

Today in Russia there is simply no one who can compare with Putin in terms of experience as a statesman, mastery of the levers of power, or strategic goal-setting, no matter how many personal grievances may be held against him on various grounds (Севастьянов 2024).

Sevastyanov also offers a typically nationalist justification for this support:

The only thing that could seriously undermine this trust is unfair terms for ending military operations in Ukraine. [...] Our people have always been ready to make sacrifices for the Fatherland, but they will not allow these sacrifices to be in vain (Севастьянов 2024).

To achieve victory over Ukraine, ethnonationalists have joined forces with pro-Kremlin “patriots” to demand punishment for “traitors to the nation” [национал-предатели] among the pro-Western factions of the Russian elites (see Изборский клуб 2022). For instance, Zhuchkovsky, who has been engaged in pro-Russian separatism in Donbas since 2014, has called for the introduction of a new *oprichnina* [опричнина], a Russian term referring to a regime of terror against the feudal elites (“boyars”), introduced by Ivan the Terrible in the second half of the sixteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Similar views were expressed by other ethnonationalist intellectuals who, in 2022, joined the ranks of Russian military units fighting in Ukraine. They include Dmitry Bastrakov (born 1992), founder of the publishing house Black Hundred [Чёрная сотня] (see Delacroix Ostromoukhova and Khriakov 2024), and Sergey Grigorov (born 1974), former advisor to liberal politician Grigory Yavlinsky and founder, in 2018, of the Movement of Russian Democrats [Движение “Русские демократы”]. On their Telegram channels, they have all expressed support for Putin, respectfully calling him “Supreme Commander-in-Chief” [Верховный Главнокомандующий].

Besides the “rally 'round the flag” effect, which has led to an overall increase in declared support for Putin and his government in opinion polls (Kizilova and Norris 2024), two motives help explain the shift in the position of Russian ethnonationalists: the framing of the Ukraine war as existential for Russianness, and the perception of Russia's “special military operation” as a chance to improve the group status of the ethnic majority. This confirms the ambiguous effects that armed conflicts may have on social actors, as discussed in Section 1.

<sup>17</sup> [Александр Жучковский](#), 09.09.2022. Telegram post.

### 5.1. An existential war Russia “cannot lose”

Russian ethnonationalists have strongly emphasised the importance of the “Ukrainian question,” showing that it is deeply connected to what it means to be Russian. In line with Kildyushov, but contrary to Krylov’s assessments, Kholmogorov highlighted in March 2022 the common historical origins of the Eastern Slavs and the human ties that continue to unite a “historical Russia” [историческая Россия]. He unequivocally states: “There is absolutely no other way than brute force to make Russians accept Ukraine’s independence. Russians will always perceive any world order that involves the separation of Ukraine from Russia as hostile” (Холмогоров 2022). Sevastyanov proves equally bold in his statement about the start of Russia’s “special military operation” against Ukraine:

It is our business and our war. Do not think that what is happening in Ukraine does not concern us here in Russia. On the contrary, it causes us serious concern. [...] The Ukrainian [national] project’s direct opposition to everything Russian [всему русскому] [...] is the historical challenge of the century (Севастьянов 2022).

By presenting the war in Ukraine as a matter of existential security, both Kholmogorov and Sevastyanov put forward the idea of preserving, or saving, Russianness through military action. Since the Ukrainian government and Ukrainians “feel an instinctive hatred towards Russians and Russia [...] the denazification of Ukraine and its re-Russification [have become] an urgent task that Russia must complete” (Севастьянов 2022). By offering Ukrainians – referred to as “Little-Russians” [малорусы or малоросы], a term commonly used during the Tsarist era to highlight the unity of Orthodox Eastern Slavs – “a program of re-Russification, we, the [ethnic] Russians of Russia, are saving ourselves as a people” (Севастьянов 2022). Kholmogorov has also resorted to the *topos* of salvation. Following Nemensky’s formula,<sup>18</sup> he metaphorically associates the Ukrainian national project with a disease, while emphasising that all means to this end are good:

The more resolutely some Ukrainians declare that they are not brothers of the Russians, but their enemies, that they want to join NATO, not Russia, the stronger the desire grows on the [Russian] side to save and heal them, whatever that may mean (Холмогоров 2022).

As an existential threat, the Ukraine war could have dramatic consequences for Russian self-identity. In ethnonationalist discourse, these consequences are usually linked to Western support for Ukraine. The West, initially perceived as the creator of the idea of the nation-state, has suddenly become an enemy interested in destroying – or “cancelling” – Russianness (Дюбуа-Ильина 2022). By the same token, Kramov has stated that Russia cannot lose this war: even if it managed to preserve its territorial integrity in the event of defeat, the country would be “neutralised” through Western-led “decolonisation.” The meaning and consequences of the latter would be comparable to that of the indigenisation policy, also known as *korenizatsiya* [коренизация] pursued by the Bolshevik government in the 1920s, and would lead to a radical weakening, if not the disappearance, of Russian national identity:

Kamala Harris’s like-minded, BLM [Black Lives Matter] associates will be sent from Washington to rule us. [...] [M]ilitant de-colonisers will create conditions in Russia in which being Russian will become extremely disadvantageous and uncomfortable. As a result, millions of people will begin to renounce their Russian identity and join the ranks of all kinds of minorities (Храмов 2022).

Sevastyanov refers to the same *topos* in a similar conspiratorial vein, echoing Putin’s statements about the West’s alleged intention to “tear apart” Russia.<sup>19</sup> The ideologue claims:

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Олег Неменский, 01.02.2020, “[‘Украинство’ – это секта по уничтожению всего русского на Земле](#)” [‘Ukrainism’ is a sect dedicated to destroying everything Russian on Earth], *Украина.ру*.

<sup>19</sup> “[Putin says West wants to ‘tear apart’ Russia. The Russian president said his war against Ukraine is supposed to ‘unite the Russian people’](#),” 25.12.2022, *Le Monde*.

[At the turn of the millennium] Westerners wanted to transform Russia into a cesspool for human surpluses [отстойник человеческих излишков] from Africa, Asia, and Latin America in order to reduce migration pressure in their own countries. Now they want something else – to get rid of Russia altogether so they can get their hands on its wealth. To achieve this, they must undermine the state-forming role of the Russian people, its role as master in its own home, and reduce its share in the population as much as possible through migration flows so that [ethnic] Russians are unable to keep all of Russia in their hands. Then they can tear Russia apart into pieces that are convenient for exploiting its wealth (Севастьянов 2024).

However, the sense of insecurity associated with the existential threat has been offset in ethnonationalist discourse by the prospect of positive developments.

### **5.2. War as an opportunity: Ethnic Russians restoring “national self-awareness”**

Like any major crisis, war is also viewed as a chance to break free from constraints and (re)build an order deemed more favourable – in the case of Russian ethnonationalists, this is an order that strengthens national self-identity by improving the status of ethnic Russians in Russia and around the world. The path to this order lies through “ethnic (or national) awakening.” Thus, according to Kholmogorov, Russia’s war on Ukraine has radically transformed the situation of both Russia and the dominant ethnicity:

The Russian Federation experienced a long crisis of identity and national consciousness. However, it was Ukraine that brought it out of this crisis. Having learnt that on a part of Russian territory [that is, Ukraine] some [ethnic] Russians were being propagandised to see themselves as “non-Russian,” the [ethnic] Russians [...] became furious (Холмогоров 2022).

Sevastyanov has also emphasised the central role of the war in the unexpected, albeit passionately desired, “revival” of Russianness, occurring for the first time since the beginning of Soviet rule:

It cannot be denied [...] that Russianness [русская тема] is now on everyone’s lips, on the pages and screens at all levels of our social existence, and therefore in our consciousness. This is a direct consequence of the SVO [“special military operation”], but it will not end there: the machine has been set in motion, and Russians are waking up *en masse* from a state of suspended anabiosis that has lasted for over a hundred years (Севастьянов 2024).

Similarly, ethnonationalist authors have praised a “Russian turn” [русский поворот] in Russian wartime domestic politics, whereby the ethnic majority has at last gained superior status over ethnic minorities previously considered privileged because of their “inner” nation-states, that is, Russia’s republics [республики]. As Khramov put it in 2024: “Gone are the days when Russian interests could be ignored. Now Tuvans, Buryats, and Dagestanis are fighting for the reunification of the Russian people [русского народа]” (Храмов 2024b).

However, from an ethnonationalist perspective, there is still much work to be done before ethnic Russians achieve a strong and secure sense of Self. For instance, in November 2022 Remizov reaffirmed the observation of a “weakened state of Russian identity in Russia itself [and even more so] in Ukraine and, to some extent, in Belarus.” Consequently, he insisted on the need to strengthen the “gravitational pull” of Russianness: “It must be positive and attractive to the country’s citizens and compatriots abroad,” thus once again addressing the issue of ethnic Russians living abroad but (supposedly) feeling connected with Russia as their homeland (Ремизов 2022).

According to Remizov, who has consistently argued for the reunification of all ethnic Russian populations (see Ремизов 2016), Russia “cannot but be a nation-state.” To justify this claim, he cites the Israeli model, while implicitly comparing the Holocaust with supposed anti-Russian sentiments

in Western countries amid Russia's war on Ukraine: "With Russophobia as the global mainstream, Russia must become a de jure and de facto sanctuary state for the Russian people, just as Israel has become for the Jews" (Ремизов 2022). Indeed, the references to Israel as a model of the nation-state and "national democracy," associated with a duty to defend the motherland from external enemies, have gained ground among Russian nationalists since the 2010s.<sup>20</sup> This is despite the continuing presence of antisemitism in Russian (ethno)nationalist online communities (Oskolkov et al. 2024; Пайн и Пайн 2024).

Like other remaining ethnonationalist ideologues, Remizov does not object to the official description of Russia as "a union, a community of peoples that has formed around the Russian core [русского ядра]" (Ремизов 2024) – a definition that corresponds to the officialised concept of the "state-civilisation" (Blakkisrud 2023). But for this to happen, Remizov insists, ethnic Russians must "find the courage to be themselves [...]. [They] need to do their homework on restoring their national self-awareness" (Ремизов 2024). The war in Ukraine is supposed to act as a litmus test here.

### Concluding remarks

This analysis of identity narratives developed by Russian ethnonationalist intellectuals prior to and during the Ukraine war clearly shows that Russianness remains a zone of conflict and a field of symbolic struggle. From an ethnonationalist perspective, due to the victim complex inherent in Russian ethnonationalism, the formation of a national Self has proved highly insecure. Ethnic Russians have been portrayed as oppressed (the underdog) and as colonial subjects (the subaltern)<sup>21</sup> – a majority with the status of "a powerless minority" (Крылов 2016, 3). While supposedly suffering from the hegemony of a multinational/anti-Russian state, this majority group strives for hegemony over minorities (see Condee 2012).

Unlike the 2014 Ukraine crisis which intensified feelings of identity uncertainty, the violent upsurge of the war in February 2022 became a source of ontological security in the ethnonationalist imaginary. This is consistent with the following observation: "Ontological security needs can be met through conflict and war" (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017, 4). In the case of Russian ethnonationalist narratives, the sense of security arose not only from the confrontation with existential threats (that is, Ukraine and the West), but also from the feeling that the former enemy had become a protector (that is, Putin's regime or the Russian state) – as manifested by Russocentric trends in official nation-building (Blakkisrud 2023) and the Kremlin's use of ethnonationalist arguments to justify the invasion of Ukraine (Fediunin 2024, 315-337). Since 2022, the ethnonationalist searching for a homogeneous nation has largely merged with Putinism – which can itself be analysed as "an actualization of the political potential associated with Russian society's insecure (or destabilized) collective identity" (Sharafutdinova 2020, 27) – to the point that they have recognised Putin as the uncontested national leader.

However, since security is a social process, its volatility is woven into the fabric of events. The outcome of Russia's war on Ukraine remains uncertain and, therefore, the transformation of the national (and international) order that Russian ethnonationalists are striving for is by no means guaranteed. Tensions between the majority group and minorities – whether immigrant or indigenous – have not lessened in times of war. Two recent examples illustrate this point.

Despite an official antimigrant campaign that began before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and intensified after the attack at the Crocus City Hall near Moscow in March 2024 (Verkhovsky 2024), Russian ethnonationalists have continued to harshly criticise the Russian government for its inability,

<sup>20</sup> See Егор Погром [Просвирнин], 24.11.2014. "[Почему русский национализм должен ссылаться на Израиль?](#)" [Why should Russian nationalism refer to Israel?], *Sputnik I Pogrom*.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, see Храмов 2021.

or unwillingness, either to assimilate migrants – by turning “Russian schools into factories for re-educating young Tajiks into Russians” – or to prevent them from entering the country (Храмов 2024a). Analysis of social media, including Telegram channels, which serve as fora for discussion in an authoritarian and repressive setting, shows that the antimigrant agenda remains key for virtually all para-state actors in Russia. In this respect, ethnonationalists are adding their voices to those of “patriots,” parliamentary opposition, and even ROC (Пайн 2025).

The second example shows that joint support for Russia’s war against Ukraine is no obstacle to symbolic conflicts either. For instance, Russian ethnonationalists have criticised the action (or inaction) of so-called Kadyrov’s men or *kadyrovtsy* [кадыровцы], that is, Chechen combatants serving in the Russian Armed Forces or the Russian National Guard (like the Akhmat special forces unit) but who are de facto subordinate to the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov (Пайн 2025, 80). In July 2025, Bastrakov, among other ethnonationalist speakers, expressed outrage towards Apti Alaudinov – a native of Chechnya who is deputy head of the Main Military-Political Directorate of the Russian Ministry of Defence and commander of the Akhmat unit – for his “attempts to deconstruct” Russian identity:

For some reason, a staunch Chechen nationalist [Alaudinov] considers it appropriate and acceptable in almost every one of his speeches to deny Russians their Russianness (“you have to earn the right to be Russian”), to define Russianness (“that Tajik over there is more Russian than ethnic Russians”), to blur [and] deny Russianness (“a Russian [русский] is not someone who is Russian, but someone who is Russian in spirit”) and so on and so forth.<sup>22</sup>

This means that being comrades in arms does not prevent Russian ethnonationalist actors from continuing to fight for their group’s status during wartime. It is highly likely that this will increase after the war ends. Much will depend on how Putin’s regime evolves, including with regard to immigration, ethnic demographics, and political reforms, but there are substantial grounds for a new “parting of ways” (Torbakov 2015) between the state and future generations of ethnonationalists.

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<sup>22</sup> [Кухня черносотенца \[Дмитрий Бастраков\]](#), 24.07.2025. Telegram post.

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