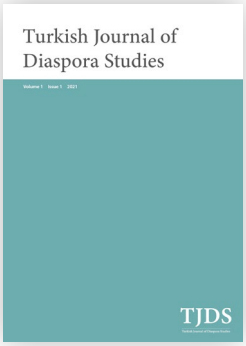

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The Politics of Russian 'Diaspora': From Compatriots to a Russian World

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Abstract

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 left twenty-five million ethnic Russians living outside the contemporary borders of the Russian Federation, the country's ruling elite have undertaken increasing efforts over time to formulate policies on "compatriots", regardless of whether this population has conceived of themselves as such. Drawing on political speeches, official policy documents, and scholarly literature, this paper seeks to illustrate how the Kremlin's understanding of the boundaries and meaning of national identity has driven its diaspora politics. More precisely, I argue that the contextualization of Russian diaspora is constituted and constrained by the vision of national identity that the Kremlin endorses over other competing visions of Russian identity, since diaspora is primarily defined in reference to *the* nation. Moreover, my research highlights that the Russia's interaction with Europe and the West plays a key role in the process of constituting its identity. This interaction, in turn, influences how the Russian authorities formulate diaspora policies in the former Soviet states. Finally, I suggest that the Kremlin's instrumentalization of compatriots serves as a domestic goal by promoting national unity around a vision of national identity that it endorses.

Keywords

Russian Diaspora, Post-Soviet Russia, Compatriots, Russian World, Putin

Introduction

What drives Russia's diaspora policies in the post-Soviet states? Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union left twenty-five million ethnic Russians living outside the contemporary borders of the Russian Federation, Russia's ruling circles have undertaken increasing efforts over time to formulate policies regarding this population. In the context of uncertainty surrounding the status of the Russians in the newly established post-Soviet states, Russia's political elite redefined the country as the homeland of ethnic Russians as well as those with "a cultural and historical 'link' to Russia" (Pilkington & Flynn, 2006, pp. 56–57). As the Kremlin employed this broad definition of nationhood to claim responsibility to protect its "compatriots" living abroad in the neighboring countries, early scholarly literature explored the potential outcomes of such diaspora policies for regional stability (King & Melvin, 1999; Kolstoe, 1995; Melvin, 1995; Shlapentokh et al., 1994; Zevelev, 2001). Yet the rhetoric of compatriot protection did not translate largely into action under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin. Only after Vladimir Putin's reelection to the presidency in

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2004, did diaspora politics begin to constitute a central place in Russia's foreign policy. Against this background, more recent scholarship has focused on how the country's foreign policy has evolved to instrumentalize its compatriots in the post-Soviet states to assert regional leadership (Grigas, 2016; Laruelle, 2015; Pieper, 2020; Saari, 2014; Suslov, 2018). Of those studies, however, only a few have devoted particular attention to identity politics in explaining the evolution of Russia's diaspora policies (Laruelle, 2015; Shevel, 2011; Suslov, 2018; Zevelev, 2014). This paper aims to complement this literature by examining how Russian identity formation has figured in the development of its foreign policy practices towards the compatriots in the neighboring states throughout the past two decades.

My work proposes that Russia's diaspora policies are shaped to a great extent by domestic debates about national identity. More precisely, I argue that the contextualization of the Russian diaspora is constituted and constrained by the Kremlin's understanding of the boundaries and meaning of national identity.[1] Therefore, the vision of national identity that the Russian authorities have endorsed over other competing visions has profoundly affected the formation and development of its diaspora in the post-Soviet states, since diaspora is primarily defined in reference to *the* nation. Second, my work claims that Russian policies towards the diaspora are particularly influenced by how the country perceives itself in relation to Europe and the West. In other words, I assert that Russia's interaction with these actors has played a key role in the process of constructing its vision of national identity, which, in turn, has affected how the Kremlin has formulated its diaspora policies in the neighboring states. Lastly, in addition to the above arguments, I argue that Russia's diaspora-related foreign policy practices may assist the authorities by strengthening public support for their particular vision of identity inside the country. As such, the Kremlin's instrumentalization of its diaspora in post-Soviet states has served a domestic purpose by developing national unity around the regime's vision of Russian identity.

While my research assesses the formation and development of Russia's compatriot policies within the context of the evolution of its national identity, it devotes a special attention to Russia's war in Georgia in 2008 and its annexation of Crimea in 2014 under the presidencies of Dmitriy Medvedev and Vladimir Putin, respectively. These two events specifically demonstrate how Russia's understanding of its position vis-à-vis Europe and the West has influenced its leaders' diaspora-related policies. Methodologically, I rely on political speeches, official policy documents, and scholarly literature to substantiate the arguments laid out above. In this vein, any quotes used for illustrative purposes from Russian presidents' statements are selected to best demonstrate how the Kremlin's understanding of national identity has shaped its policies towards the compatriots. By highlighting domestic sources of Russian foreign policy making, this paper also offers an explanation as to why and when state diaspora policies undergo transformation.

In the rest of the article, I first provide an overview of post-Soviet Russian diaspora studies and outline my own theoretical framework. The following sections examine the evolution of Russia's policies towards its compatriots in tandem with the development of Russian national identity as promoted by the Kremlin in the past two decades. In conclusion, I summarize and discuss the findings of my research.

The Russian 'Diaspora' and Identity Politics

The study of the Russian diaspora in the post-Soviet states grew as a significant avenue of research throughout the 1990s. Most studies at this time tended to focus on how Russian communities historically had come to settle in the newly established states, their current situation as well as the citizenship, minority, and the language policies of the states that they lived in, and Russia's policies regarding these communities, any domestic factors that shaped such policies, any probability of regional instability (Chinn & Kaiser, 1996; King & Melvin, 1999; Kolstoe, 1995; Shlapentokh et al., 1994; Zevelev, 2001). Alternatively, some other studies focused on identity relations, how the formation of national identities in these post-Soviet states would affect the Russian communities, and whether these communities that found themselves suddenly living outside the new Russian state would develop a distinctive identity, integrate and assimilate, or emigrate (Laitin, 1999; Melvin, 1995). Yet, by the end of the 1990s, more studies began to question the appropriateness of employing the term "diaspora" to describe Russian communities in post-Soviet states, noting that Russians living abroad had actually been cut off from their homeland as a result of receding state borders rather than involuntary dispersion and that they developed varying attitudes towards the homeland among themselves (Kosmarskaya, 364 C.E.; Pilkington & Flynn, 2006; Smith, 1999).[2]

Whether or not Russian communities living abroad constitutes a diaspora in the conventional sense of the term notwithstanding, Rogers Brubaker's (2005) proposition to conceive of diaspora "as a category of practice" laid the ground for much of the following literature. In essence, this line of thinking treats diaspora "as a way of formulating the identities and loyalties of a population" (2005, p. 5). Then, the obvious question arises: Who does such formulating on behalf of a given population? Building upon this insight, here I focus on how Russia's political elite has sought to invent a diaspora with references to "compatriots" regardless of whether Russian communities in the former Soviet republics have conceived of themselves as such. Even though I pay particular attention to Russia's position vis-à-vis Europe and the West in explaining its diaspora policies, my primary aim is not to provide a geopolitical perspective.

At the same time, some recent studies have offered in-depth geopolitical analyses of Russia's policies towards compatriots. For instance, Agnia Grigas (2016) explains that the Putin regime has instrumentalized its diaspora abroad with the purpose of reimperializing the post-Soviet states. Her work identifies a set of diaspora policies that have served as the Kremlin's primary means to achieve this end, including soft power tools, passportization, and annexation of territories where the compatriots settled. Similarly, Moritz Pieper (2020) discusses how the Kremlin's pretextual use of protecting the compatriots served to revise territorial boundaries as its relations with the West deteriorated, focusing on Russian political discourse concerning humanitarian responsibility during the Georgian war in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Mikhail Suslov (2018) alternatively sheds light on the evolution of geopolitical thinking, surveying how the "Russian World" concept has been connected to the idea of "sphere of influence" in the past two decades.

Exploring a different perspective than geopolitics, this article examines the link between the formation of Russian identity and the development of its diaspora policies. To that end, my analysis delves into Russia's interaction with Europe and the West, with the purpose of

investigating how such interactions have shaped the process of constituting its identity. Prior discussions of diaspora have sometimes focused on this issue. For instance, Igor Zevelev (2008, 2014) suggests that the country's diaspora-related policies mirror its struggle to define nationhood, while explaining further how Russia's understanding of the West has affected its search for identity by means of foreign policy practices. Alternatively, Oxana Shevel (2011) argues that the ambiguous definition of "compatriots" in the law assists to solve Russia's identity question, albeit without actually defining group boundaries. Therefore, this enables the Kremlin to pursue a wide array of policies abroad. Marlene Laruelle (2015) shows how the narrative of "Russia as a divided nation" has been used lately by the Kremlin to prioritize a cultural model of nationhood over the territorial one, highlighting that this narrative has been the only nationalist rhetoric incorporated into Russia's compatriot policies in the post-Soviet era. Somewhat similarly, Erika Harris (2020) discusses how the Kremlin's efforts to designate itself as a kin-state facilitated the construction of Russian nationhood in ethno-cultural and linguistic terms, pointing to the connection between Russia's interference in neighboring states on compatriots' behalf and its unfinished, nation-building project. Yet all these studies, even though they center on national identity, fall short of defining its content explicitly.

Aiming to complement this existing body of scholarship, the paper offers an analysis that explains how Russian identity-formation has interacted with the Kremlin's approach to diaspora-related policies in the past two decades. In doing so, my analysis builds on a framework of identity developed by Abdelal et al. (2009). This framework captures the meaning of identity by breaking it down into four parts: Constitutive norms which refer to the membership rules and appropriate behavior in a group; social purposes which point to the goals that group members seek to achieve; relational comparisons which indicate how group members view themselves vis-à-vis outgroups; and cognitive models which describe how members conceive their group's place in the world.

The above framework provides analytical clarity in my efforts to demonstrate how the Kremlin's understanding of the boundaries and meaning of Russian identity has shaped its approach to the diaspora since the early 2000s. It also assists me in illustrating how Russia's interactions with Europe and the West has played a key role in the development of its national identity. By following this framework, the rest of the paper analyzes the evolution of Russian identity during two periods – between 2000 and 2009 and between 2010 and 2018 –, broadly reflecting the shift in its content as promoted by the Kremlin. In doing so, I seek to explain the evolution of Russia's policies towards its compatriots in the post-Soviet states.

The Construction and Cultivation of Loyal Compatriots, 2000-2009

Once Vladimir Putin came to power after President Boris Yeltsin's unexpected resignation on New Year's Eve 1999, the fierce political competition within Russia to define the essence of and the rules for inclusion in nation that surrounded the post-Soviet period began to wane. Although many scholars neglected the ideational aspect of the Putin rule in early years, a few discerned how the regime had co-opted different strands of Russian political thinking in its quest to form a national unity (Evans, 2008; Laruelle, 2009; Verkhovskii & Pain, 2015). In fact, Putin's intention to develop a Russian idea manifested itself even before he became president. In a newspaper

article published in late 1999, Putin designated a set of values – namely, "patriotism", "great-powerness", "state-centeredness", and "social solidarity" – as the basis of national unity, although he was simultaneously unequivocal about his opposition to an official ideology organized by state. Moreover, he called such values as "the traditional values of Russians (*rossiyan*)" (Putin, 1999), even though they were evidently elements of ethnic Russian (*russkiy*) culture (Kolstø, 2016, p. 19).

Acceptance of ethnic Russian culture as a criterion for belonging to the nation is accompanied by speaking Russian. The centrality of Russian culture and language in the Kremlin's vision of national identity, however, does not mean that cultural and linguistic diversity of non-Russian groups remain unrecognized. But, rather, it is indicative of hierarchical organization in which state privileges traditions of ethnic Russians at the expense of all other groups, as opposed to any civic notion of nationhood. Ethnic and cultural identities aside, inclusion in the nation is further conditioned upon remaining steadfastly loyal to the authorities. This expectation of loyalty is linked to a common past, with the Kremlin recurrently referring to the state's historical role in the lives of its people (Putin, 1999; Surkov, 2009). Though political allegiance does not define what it means to be Russian alone, it nevertheless, along with the cultural and linguistic markers of Russianness, establishes who would be included in the nation.

Moreover, the regime's appeals to the cultural essence and common past of the nation become even more explicit when the Kremlin formulates its identity in relation to external politics. The ways in which the Russian authorities use historical narratives of imperial and Soviet past tend to envision a national identity with Russia as being a great power and regional hegemon (Putin, 1999, 2005). Not only are these narratives important for consolidating Russians around distinct beliefs, but they also assist to justify the Kremlin's claim of a privileged position in the post-Soviet space as the heir of the Russian empire and Soviet state. Indeed, in official political statements, references to Russia's historically special role became more common especially in reaction to the West's increasing influence in the region. To put it different, with the color revolutions toppling the political leaders favored by the Kremlin in Georgia in 2003 and in Ukraine in 2004, Russia's relationship with Europe transformed. As opposed to its claim that Russia belongs to the civilization of Europe in early 2000s, the Kremlin began to emphasize its "civilizational distinctness". According to the rhetoric of "sovereign democracy", for example, Russia could not simply follow Western models of development as its "historic, geography, and other particularities" entail it to find its specific path (Putin, 2005; Surkov, 2009). Conveniently, this line of thinking assisted to oppose Western liberal ideas in domestic politics (Putin, 2006, 2007), while the nation purportedly develop its particular democratic model in accordance with its own traditions. However, it also led to a more assertive foreign policy in the post-Soviet space through a historical narrative of a common history and culture (Putin, 2005), which was further emphasized in response to NATO's prospect of inclusion Georgia and Ukraine discussed in Bucharest in April 2008 (A. P. Tsygankov, 2016). Perhaps more important for the discussion here, with the Kremlin embarking upon a path to assert its leadership position in Eurasia, its diaspora came to be contextualized in a different way than in the 1990s.

As the new Russian Federation under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin undertook nation-building efforts in civic terms (Tolz, 2001), its relation to those who found themselves overnight left behind in the post-Soviet states tended to be inclusive in definition. Referring

to this population as "compatriots abroad", the Federal Law "On the State Policy of the Russian Federation Concerning Compatriots Abroad" of May 1999 defined them as those "who were born in one state, are residing and having resided in it" and "who share a common language, history, cultural heritage, traditions and customs", as well as "their direct descendants", with the exception of "descendants of persons who belong to the titular nations of foreign states" (*Federal Law No. 99-FZ*, n.d.). This definition of compatriot is seemingly vague in explaining who is included in and excluded from the Russian diaspora. For instance, by not clarifying what forms a common language, history, and culture, the law falls short of precisely identifying who belongs to the diaspora. In the end, as Oxana Shevel notes, "anyone from ethnic Russians to all former Soviet citizens" essentially can be categorized as a compatriot (Shevel, 2011, p. 193).

This vague definition of what it means to be a compatriot began to acquire more specificity when Vladimir Putin assumed the Russian presidency. In his 2001 speech at the First World Congress of Russian Compatriots, Putin expressed that embrace of the Russian language and culture (*russkaya kul'tura*) constitutes the essence of the diaspora. Along with ethnic Russians, those who left Russia at the time of the Soviet Union came to be defined as compatriots as long as they self-identify spiritually as one by "speak[ing], think[ing], and … feel[ing] in Russian" (Putin, 2001). This line of thinking also manifested itself when an official foreign policy document in 2006 defined the diaspora along the lines of Russian language, culture, and spiritual unity with the country (as cited in Shevel, 2011, p. 194). What is perhaps more striking, Putin (2001), for the first time in the above-mentioned speech, appealed to a Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) that exists "beyond the boundaries of Russia and even far beyond the boundaries of Russian ethnos". At the same time, this notion of the Russian World corresponding to the linguistic and cultural essence of the diaspora was reformulated in the second decade of the 2000s in a way that would better promote political ambitions of the Russian leadership in the realm of foreign policy.

While ethnic Russians and culturally Russified persons – aside from the citizens of Russian Federation – were thus implied to form the core of the Russian diaspora (Byford, 2012; Grigas, 2016; Shevel, 2011; Ziegler, 2006); their loyalty to the Russian state came to be considered essential to the identity of compatriots. As an extension of the concept of "sovereign democracy" gaining a foothold in the regime's rhetoric, the Russian diaspora was encouraged to form closer connections to the Russian state by way of organizational structures, while being simultaneously invented (Suslov, 2018, p. 338). Importantly, moreover, this diaspora strategy aimed to assert Russia's leadership in the post-Soviet states – which it views as its sphere of influence – against the West's political, economic, and military advances. As such, a number of organizations sprung up to coordinate relations between presumably loyal compatriots abroad and the Russian state after the mid-2000s. For instance, the World Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots was set up to strengthen communication between the Russian authorities and the diaspora (*VKSRS*, n.d.). The Russian World Foundation was initiated by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science in order to "reconnect the Russian community abroad with their homeland, forging new and stronger links through cultural and social programs". Tellingly, those programs assist to "enhance and encourage the appreciation of Russian language, heritage, and culture" (*Fond "Russkiy Mir,"* n.d.). In a similar vein, the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (*Rossotrudnichestvo*), which lies within

the domain of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, works with compatriots to protect their rights as well as promotes cultural and educational relations (*Rossotrudnichestvo*, n.d.). In parallel to forging the loyalty of the diaspora to the Russian state and its culture by way of organizational consolidation, official foreign policy documents began to involve more content about the Kremlin's commitment to defend the rights of compatriots abroad and to preserve their ethnic and cultural identity and connection to Russia (*The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, 2008).

Perhaps most importantly, this regime-backed political project of inventing and cultivating a loyal diaspora came to serve as a primary means to restore Russian identity as a great power and a regional hegemon. As noted above, following the Kremlin's embracement of the "sovereign democracy" concept, Russia pursued a more assertive foreign policy in its post-Soviet neighborhood. For instance, presumably in reaction to the West's growing influence in Georgia, then-president Dmitriy Medvedev sent Russian troops to South Ossetia and Abkhazia in August 2008 when the opportunity arose. Even though neither ethnic Russians nor native Russian speakers were present in South Ossetia according to a 1989 census (as cited in Grigas, 2016, p. 42), the Kremlin justified its military intervention with a narrative of compatriot protection (Medvedev, 2008), since a large share of Abkhazs and Ossetians obtained a Russian passport following a new citizenship law passed in 2002 (as cited in Grigas, 2016, p. 83). This narrative of defending the rights of Russian compatriots in South Ossetia and Abkhazia did not aim to reimagine the relationship between the peoples of these regions and Russia as the homeland; but, rather, it intended to feed Russia's great power aspiration by restoring its regional leadership where it claims "privileged interests". Important for this discussion, Russians consistently chose restoration or preservation of the country's superpower status on the world stage as one of their primary expectations from the president, according to public opinion polls conducted in 1996-2012 (Levada Center, 2013, p. 107). In a way, Medvedev's decision to use military force in Georgia conformed to this expectation.

In addition to asserting its great power identity, Russia's 2008 war with Georgia assisted the Kremlin to advance its civilizational discourse. As Valentina Feklyunina highlights, throughout the conflict, the Russian authorities framed the pro-Western government of Georgia as being "motivated by 'Russophobia'"(March, 2011, p. 193). By "demand[ing] that the Georgian government respect the Russian government, its people *and its values*" (March, 2011, p. 200), In this way, Medvedev was able to promote a vision of Russianness inside the country along ethno-cultural lines. At the same time, the emphasis on Russian values led the authorities to counterpose Russia's civilizational distinctiveness to Western communities, even though Russia was still imagined a part of Europe.[3] In the end, this political discourse revealed itself to resonate with the identity aspirations of Russian society, garnering profound public support for Medvedev and Putin (The Levada Center, 2015). These events subsequently set a course for Russia's identity development as a "state-civilization" in the 2010s. As we will see below, the Kremlin's policies towards its diaspora played a crucial role in constituting and endorsing this identity.

Compatriots in the Making of a Russian World, 2010-2018

Faced with challenges from opposition forces after the fraudulent parliamentary elections of 2011 and in the run-up to the presidential elections of 2012 in which Putin ran for a third term, the Kremlin embarked upon reformulating Russian national idea, with the goal of consolidating public support for the regime. As introduced by Putin (2012) in a newspaper article published as a part of his election campaign, this vision of national identity stresses Russia's distinctive civilizational values as the essence of the nation, while emphasizing the centrality of the state in the historical development of Russian identity. More precisely, Putin claimed that Russia has historically developed as a "state-civilization", while insisting that the "Russian people have confirmed their choice [to be a multi-ethnic civilization] time and again during their thousand-year history". Importantly, he maintained, "the Russian people (*russkiy narod*) and Russian culture (*russkaya kul'tura*) are the linchpin that binds this unique civilization together". In his speech to the Valdai Club a year later, Putin (2013) similarly stressed that "Russia … as a state-civilization reinforced by the Russian people, Russian language, Russian culture, Russian Orthodox church, and the country's other traditional religions".

In this respect, with Putin's return to the presidency, ethnic Russian customs, traditions, and language – in other words, civilizational values – have been unequivocally elevated to define the boundaries and meaning of national identity. Accordingly, regardless of whether a group of people are ethnically Russian, their commitment to "preserving the dominance of Russian culture" is considered sufficient to being included in the nation (Putin, 2012). As discussed earlier, this vision of domestic identity is not novel. However, what has subsequently shifted is the increasing weight and visibility of ethnicity in its content. By referring to ethnic Russians as state-forming people, Putin especially endorsed this ethno-cultural vision of nation. Not only does the regime's emphasis on ethnic Russians affirm their privileged position in nation, but it also highlights once again that minority groups are accepted as long as they uphold Russian values.

What is, moreover, interesting is that traditional values that Putin defined as the essence of Russian nation have now been reformulated as conservative values in the wake of 2011-2012 popular protests. For instance, at his Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin (2013) argued for a "conservative position", stressing that "[the] destruction of traditional values … not only leads to negative consequences for society, but is also essentially anti-democratic, since it …. runs counter to the will of the majority". Following this, he positioned Russia as a force "defending traditional values which have constituted the spiritual and moral foundation of civilization of every nation's for thousands of years". More importantly, this framing assisted the Kremlin to depict anti-regime protesters as a liberal minority – as well as agents of Western governments –, disrespecting the majority's traditional way of life.[4] At the same time, such a comparison laid the foundation of Russia's political rhetoric towards the West.

As noted earlier, Russia's view of itself in relation to the West has undergone a transformation over the last two decades. Even though official statements continue to acknowledge Russia's Europeanness,[5] there has been a growing emphasize on Russia's own distinctive civilizational values.[6] This has been evidenced most particularly in the political discourse of the regime contrasting Russia's conservative values to Western liberal values. For instance, at the Valdai

Club meeting of 2013, Putin (2013) stated that "we can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that form the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual". Along these lines, Putin presented Russia as being committed to preserving religious and moral values against the expansion of the West's liberal order (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2017; A. Tsygankov, 2016). More importantly, when Russia annexed Crimea in the wake of popular protests in 2013-2014 – which had toppled the pro-Russian president of Ukraine –, this discourse formed the basis of a "Russian World" identity-claim. To put it differently, Russia's claim of civilizational distinctiveness revealed itself even further in the "Russian World" project.

In this regard, the "Russian World" concept has evolved from highlighting organizational consolidation of loyal compatriots around Russian state to legitimizing Russia's interference in neighboring countries with the purpose of defending its compatriots' *way of life* during Putin's third presidency. What the Kremlin saw as a threat to its compatriots were not only nationalists and Russophobes sponsored by foreign governments to depose the Ukrainian government, but also growing efforts of the West to contain Russia in the post-Soviet region.[7] Putin (2014c) summed up this sentiment by stating that "at threat were our compatriots, Russian people (*russkiye lyudi*), and people of other nationalities, their language, history, culture and legal rights". He then clarified that "when I speak of Russian people and Russian-speaking citizens I am referring to those who consider themselves part of the broad Russian world, they may not necessarily be ethnic Russians, but they consider themselves Russian people (*russkim chelovekom*)". Hence, this assertation suggests that the criteria for belonging to the Russian World is rather cultural, echoing the Kremlin's evolving vision of particular domestic identity. The idea of the Russian World as a cultural community had recently appeared in Russia's amended compatriots law of 2010 which listed those "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 belong to people which have historically lived on the territory of the Russian Federation" as compatriots (as cited in Shevel, 2011, p. 192). More importantly, by defining compatriots along cultural and linguistic lines, the Russian authorities created room to maneuver in determining who could be argued to be part of the Russian World.

Yet this seemingly inclusive essence of the Russian World does not mean to downplay the preeminence of ethnic Russians among others. Even when Putin (2012) emphasized the cultural boundaries of the Russian diaspora, he referred to the unifying role of ethnic Russians in explaining why they "have never formed ethnic diasporas anywhere". More strikingly, in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea, ethnic Russians were unequivocally acknowledged as the backbone of the Kremlin's compatriot project. Important to note here is that Russians made up fifty-eight percent of the Crimean population, followed by Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars at twenty-four percent and twelve percent respectively, according to census data from 2001 (State Statistic Committee of Ukraine, 2001). Therefore, Putin (2014a) stated that "millions of Russians (*russkikh*) went to bed in one country and woke up abroad, overnight becoming ethnic minorities in the former Union republics, while the Russian nation (*russkiy narod*) became one of the biggest – if not the biggest – divided nations in the world". In a way, this divided-nation rhetoric assisted "positioning of Russia as an ethnic 'homeland'" (Harris, 2020, p. 3; Teper, 2016).

What is, moreover, remarkable is Putin's use of historical narratives to emphasize the Orthodox Christian and Slavic essence of Russian nation. While expressing the importance of Crimea for Russians, Putin (2014a), for instance, underlined that "this is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus".[8] In the same vein, he described Kyiv as "the mother of Russian cities", while invoking ancient Rus as a shared history of Slavic people. The same understanding subsequently led him to suggest that "Russian and Ukrainians are one people". All this considered, it becomes evident that Russia imagines itself as the leader of a Russian World, that is "a Slavic, Russian-speaking, [and] Orthodox Christian civilization" (Grigas, 2016, p. 93).

At the same time, Russia's claim to be the leader of a historic Russian World perpetuates its influence over the territories that Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union once ruled. In fact, the Kremlin has referenced to Russian World with a historical narrative, when legitimizing its interference in the former Soviet states and reclaiming its regional hegemon status. Even in eastern Ukraine where Russia did not openly intervene in the ongoing military conflict there, the Kremlin invoked the imperial past to highlight its "privileged interest" in these territories, while discussing the protection of the rights and interest of local Russians (*russkikh*) and Russian speakers (Putin, 2014b). Additionally, the Russian authorities frequently called Sevastopol as a historically Russian city, while clarifying why they cannot allow NATO's expansion to this land (Putin, 2014c). As some scholars have highlighted, the Russian regime has deliberately associated identity concerns with perceived external threats in a quest to solidify domestic support. In turn, not only did a sizable portion of Russians show support for Russia's right to defend Russian speakers in Crime and Eastern Ukraine (cited in Taylor, 2014), but they also saw Russia's annexation of Crimea as a means to restore its super power status and reassert its regional leadership (The Levada Center, 2016). As seen in the case of Georgia, the Kremlin's identity appeals raised strong domestic support, with Putin's approval rating reaching above eighty percent following Russia's annexation of Crimea (The Levada Center, n.d.).

Conclusion

This article has sought to address a simple, yet important question: What drives Russia's policies towards its compatriots living in the post-Soviet states? I have acknowledged that such question comes with a caveat that those who are broadly defined as compatriots by the Russian authorities might not consider themselves as such. In this respect, I have argued that the politics of Russian diaspora has been profoundly shaped by the Kremlin's understanding of the boundaries and meaning of what constitutes the Russian nation. This article, moreover, has claimed that the Kremlin's understanding of itself vis-à-vis Europe and the West has played a crucial role in the process of constructing Russian national identity. Finally, I have asserted that Russia's engagement in the politics of diaspora has functioned to consolidate society around the Kremlin's preferred vision of identity. In order to support these claims, I have employed an analytical framework that has enabled me to trace shifts in Russian identity as endorsed by the regime by dissecting its content. Concurrently, I have traced the development of Russian diaspora policies towards its neighboring states in the last two decades.

Following Putin's rise to power, Russia's struggle to find its post-Soviet identity came to be addressed along cultural and linguistic markers. Not only did this vision of national identity allude to the preeminence of ethnic Russian values over other groups, it also established loyalty to the authorities as a criterion for inclusion within the nation. Even though the Kremlin has asserted that Russia belongs to European civilization, the West's advances in the post-Soviet space led it to reassess their relationship. Soon thereafter, the Russian authorities embarked upon a path to construct and cultivate loyal compatriots in neighboring states by means of organizational structures. In parallel to the development of Russian identity, the Kremlin emphasized the cultural and linguistic essence of its diaspora. Therefore, when an opportunity presented itself in 2008, the Russian authorities invoked alleged Russophobia as a pretext for defending its compatriots in Georgia. The Russian leadership garnered strong domestic backing, as the struggle to protect its compatriots became associated with Russia's assertation of its great power status and regional leadership. However, Russia's popular protests of 2011-2012 and Ukraine's pro-Western revolution of 2014 have generated significant challenges for the Russian authorities. In its bid to solidify pro-regime support, the Russian authorities began to reformulate Russian idea. Not only did this evolving course of Russian identity development explicitly assert the privileged status of ethnic Russian over minority groups, but it also positioned Russia as the defender of traditional values against decaying Western political liberalism. When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, such shifts in identity content were reflected in the "Russian World" concept. Therefore, the Kremlin's narrative regarding its right to protect primarily ethnic Russian compatriots in Ukraine assisted Russia's claim to be a leader of a distinct civilization that extends beyond its national territories.

In summary, my research has showed that even though the contours of Russian identity as promoted by the Kremlin have remained essentially unchanged, the relative weight of ethnic content within it has significantly increased over time. Similarly, the Russian authorities have placed a growing emphasize on Russia's civilizational distinctiveness since the second half of the 2000s, even though they continued to highlight Russia's Europeanness. In this respect, the Kremlin's evolving understanding of Russian nationhood has driven its diaspora policies towards the neighboring states, while "compatriots abroad" have simultaneously assisted the Russian leadership to domestically promote its own vision of the nation.

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Notes

[1] On the relationship between diasporic identity and national identity, see (Barabantseva & Sutherland, 2011; Brubaker, 2005; Hall, 1990).

[2] On the definition of diaspora, see (Brubaker, 2005).

[3] This idea draws on (Verkhovskii & Pain, 2015, p. 3).

[4] See videos of pro-Putin rallies on February 4 and February 23, 2012 which are available on YouTube.

[5] For instance, the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2013) states that "the Euro-Atlantic which, besides geography, economy and history, have common deep-rooted civilizational ties with Russia". Also, see (Lavrov, 2018)

[6] For an in-dept discussion on this topic, see (Linde, 2016).

[7] At a Conference of Russian Ambassadors, Putin (2014c) stated that "we clearly had no right to abandon the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol to the mercy of nationalist and radical militants; we could not allow our access to the Black Sea to be significantly limited; we could not allow NATO forces to eventually come to the land of Crimea and Sevastopol".

[8] Also, see (Putin, 2014d).

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