Russian Society and the Conflict in Ukraine: Masses, Elites and Identity

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This chapter looks at how Russian society reacted to the conflict in and with Ukraine. The active phase of the conflict began in March 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and continued with Moscow's support for the separatist movements in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine. The main object of interest here is popular views of the conflict and its context, and in particular the way these views are conditioned by nationalism and the national identity discourse. At the same time, as I show in the first section, it is hardly possible to consider 'public opinion' as ontologically separate from the public debate waged mainly by the elites, as well as from the state's policies and the way they are legitimated. The issue is not just that public opinion is influenced by the state propaganda, but that both are part of the same broader discursive domain where meaning is constructed and reproduced.

Accordingly, this chapter starts with an analysis of Russian public opinion on the conflict and its relationship to the official propaganda. I then go on to discuss how the attitudes to Ukraine and the wider assessment of Russian foreign policy in recent years are related to the complex ways in which the Russian nation is defined and how the concept of the 'Russian world' plays into the picture. The final section focuses on the broader context of what Russians see as Western expansionism and how they justify Russia's conduct in terms of the need to defend the country's sovereignty and moral integrity against Western subversion. It is not my ambition in this chapter to present any original analysis of primary sources; rather, I see my task as summing up the findings of the existing studies (including my own) and highlighting the key issues that have come up in the scholarly debate so far.

Russian Public Opinion on Ukraine and the Conflict

Russian society's response to the conflict in/with Ukraine must be analysed at different levels. The most easily accessible type of data are opinion polls. These, unsurprisingly, demonstrate that the Russian government enjoys the overwhelming support of its population. This phenomenon is most visible when it comes to the annexation of Crimea. Around half of the population 'definitely' supports this move, while the total share of positive attitudes has consistently remained above 80 per cent (Levada Centre 2016a). Similarly, as Denis Volkov (2015) points out, 'Russians are virtually unanimous (95-96 per cent) in denying their own country's responsibility for anything that's happening in Ukraine: the ongoing conflict, breaches of the Minsk Agreements, the shooting down of MH17 etc.' As highlighted by Lev Gudkov (2015b, 35-36), the annexation of Crimea produced a political transition among the relatively prosperous urban population, comprising about 20-25 per cent of the citizenry, who used to distance themselves from the regime but now fully support Putin and his foreign policy.

Even though the profound effect of the conflict with Ukraine on Russian public opinion is beyond doubt, this fact remains open to vastly different interpretations. Thus, Levada Centre scholars tend to explain Russia's stalled

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transition to democracy in general and the intervention in Ukraine in particular by referring to the lingering paternalistic attitudes, imprinted on the political culture by the 70 years of the Soviet rule (e.g. Levada 2004; for a critique, see Gabovich 2008). This reading implies that, in the final analysis, the role of the Kremlin's anti-Ukrainian propaganda consisted not so much in shaping the preferences of the audience as in voicing, legitimising and radicalising the views that the pro-Putin majority had held ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It seems that a similar view is embraced by Ted Hopf in his study of the interplay between mass common sense and elites' views in Russia. According to Hopf, while the elites strive to bring the country closer to the West, 'common sense is hindering any Russian movement from the semi-periphery to the core of Western hegemony' and thus 'has an effect on the distribution of power in the international system' (2013, 348). From this perspective, the conservative turn in Russian politics after 2012 could be interpreted as a result of the elites having finally embraced mass common sense. As Volkov (2015) puts it, the 'propaganda machine can only exploit sentiments and fears that are already present', 'a mistrust for the West …, the passive consumption of television content by the majority of the population, and a nostalgia for lost superpower status' experienced by the typical *Homo Sovieticus*.

At the same time, both Hopf and Gudkov, a leading proponent of the *Homo Soveticus* theory (see Gudkov 2009), are much more careful in their empirical analysis of the 'Crimean syndrome'. Gudkov, for instance, dismisses the implication that 'Russians have a metaphysical inclination toward traditionalism as such' and explains the surge in nationalism by 'a perceived lack of choice – a lack of alternative sources of authority and alternative ideas about the desirable and likely medium- and long-term future of the country' (2015b, 38). Similarly, in a later article, Hopf (2016) offers a more complex account of the discursive struggles that led up to the Crimean annexation, emphasising the role played by Putin and other leaders, as well as the impact of the Western expansion, which most Russians viewed as hostile.

The elites' agency comes out as an even more prominent factor in Peter Pomerantsev's influential account of the Kremlin's tactics: in his view, the goal is to infuse the public with a poisonous dose of cynicism by constantly exposing conspiracies and corruption – real and imagined – behind all political actors and institutions, in Russia and elsewhere, with only the Kremlin being immune to such disparagement. The resulting worldview is that 'nothing is true and everything is possible' (Pomerantsev 2015). Nuanced studies of public opinion consistently emphasise the complexity of this phenomenon: even though the anti-Western, anti-Ukrainian and xenophobic views clearly dominate, they go along with the reluctance to support direct military intervention in the neighbouring country and even the view that cooperation with the West on certain issues is desirable (Gerber 2015; Sherlock 2014; Volkov 2015).

This multifaceted discussion has direct bearing on the central argument of this chapter. It demonstrates that it would be wrong to reduce the consideration of Russian society's response to the Euromaidan revolution, the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbas to any individual factor. More specifically, while it must certainly be viewed through the prism of such concepts as nationalism and imperialism, these phenomena themselves are inherently contradictory and conditioned by radically dissimilar historical legacies. While imperialism is expansionist and inclusive, ethnic nationalism emphasises cultural homogeneity and thus treats even some Russian citizens as unwelcome strangers. The lasting impact of Soviet official internationalism makes the picture even more complex. Russian mass common sense is a mix of all these diverse elements: indeed, the concept of common sense itself, as it was introduced by Antonio Gramsci, presupposes a view of this phenomenon as necessarily protean, an incongruous combination of archaic and modern norms and values (Morton 2007, 62; Liguori 2009, 129). While the official ideology might be able, at times, to come up with a more consistent national identity narrative, it is also subject both to the demands of the political moment and the constraints imposed by the socially embedded popular views. As a result, many of the key political statements made by the Russian leaders are deliberately ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations. Nowhere is this more evident than in the field of national identity politics.

National Identity, Nationalism and Foreign Policy

It is common to point out the incompatibility between the ethnic, imperial and civic versions of Russian national identity (Tolz 1998, 2004; Shevel 2011). The first two appear to be conducive to some form of intervention in Ukraine, while the latter must, in principle, offer an alternative image of Russia and Russianness. Civic identity,

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however, has been in retreat since 2012, while the rise of ethnic nationalism was admittedly behind the perception of Russia as a divided nation and the image of 'the Russian world', used to legitimise the annexation of Crimea and the support for the Donbas insurgents (Zevelev 2014; Feklyunina 2015). Nevertheless, as Marlene Laruelle demonstrates,

the status of this 'divided nation' line of argument remains instrumental: it is part of the discursive repertoire of Russia's foreign policy, deployed whenever the Kremlin needs to penalize a neighbor for its geopolitical or political disloyalty, but it does not appear as a driver of routine foreign policy decisions. (2015b, 95)

At the same time, ethnic nationalism is difficult to reconcile with the political reality of a multi-ethnic nation created on the ruins of empire. The problem is, however, that neither of the available alternatives can achieve unconditional hegemony (Laruelle 2015c). While nostalgic memories about the Soviet and imperial past seem to dominate mass common sense (Kozlov 2016) and are a useful resource for the propaganda machine, it is hard to directly translate them into a national identity for today's Russia.

A key, albeit not the only, reason for the limited utility of the imperial legacy is that the latter is, in itself, full of contradictions. Thus, the Soviet 'affirmative action empire' (Martin 2001) promoted the essentialised notion of ethnicity as the basis for nationhood, the principle of ethnic ownership of territories through the system of national autonomies (Miller 2007), the ideology of proletarian internationalism and equality of nations, combined, somewhat uneasily and with a varying degree of determination, with the imperial idea of ethnic Russians as 'the first among the equals'. If one adds to that the prominence of Orthodox Christianity and the romanticised view of family and other 'traditional values' usually associated with the pre-1917 Russia, the resulting mixture becomes utterly eclectic and untranslatable into a clear-cut dividing line between the national 'self' and the 'others'.

While the broad set of patriotic values promoted by the Kremlin is shared by a vast majority of the population, no specific definition of what it means to be a patriot enjoys the same universally accepted status. As revealed in a recent study by Paul Goode, when confronted with direct and specific questions, Russian citizens find it hard to agree on the meaning of patriotism and have to deploy various strategies to eliminate apparent contradictions. Importantly, for Goode's respondents, 'ethnic nationalism – though common in discussions of patriotism – rarely figured into evaluations of foreign policy or the Kremlin's policy toward Ukraine' (Goode 2016).

Opinion polls demonstrate that the Russian public is split down the middle on the question of whether Russians and Ukrainians are one people or two separate peoples, with the proportion of those who see Ukrainians as a separate nation steadily, but unevenly, increasing from 17 per cent in 2005 to 43 per cent in May 2016. The approval of the idea that Russia and Ukraine must merge into a single state peaked at 28 per cent at the moment of Crimean annexation, before dropping below ten per cent by the end of 2014 and remaining at more or less the same level ever since. On the contrary, a growing share of the population (36 per cent in May 2016) supports complete separation between the two states, with visas, customs controls and so on. In spite of this, those in favour of friendly relations with an independent Ukraine, without visas and customs barriers, have always remained a majority (Levada Centre 2016a). Generally, the Russian public does not support slogans of territorial expansion or intervention in the affairs of neighbouring states (Volkov 2015).

In other words, detailed studies looking at the relationship between the attitudes of the Russian masses and foreign policy, using both qualitative and quantitative methods and looking through the prism of public opinion as well as from the disciplinary perspective of international relations, tend to agree that Russian society remains divided with regard to any specific foreign policy issue. It would be equally wrong, however, to conclude that the masses are completely passive and ready to approve of any policy that the Kremlin might happen to select at any given moment. Any serious political choice still requires careful legitimation that needs to be constructed out of the existing eclectic elements of common sense.

Moscow's bold decision to intervene in Ukraine stands out as an exception against the overall background of Putin's presidency, which, at least prior to 2014, had been associated with prioritising the status quo and avoiding direct confrontation (with an important exception of the 2008 war with Georgia, see Astrov 2011). This decision needs to be

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understood as a reaction to what was perceived as an acute crisis of the international system, which in this view had lost its balance and required urgent action to prevent a genuine catastrophe. The point of origin of the crisis was easy to identify: predictably, it was seen as instigated by the irresponsible and expansionist West. The relationship with the West is important not just for Russian foreign policy makers, but for the society at large, and it needs to be explored in some detail.

Looking in the Western Mirror

What unites all definitions of the Russian nation examined in the previous section is that eventually they need the Western mirror to make sense in the wider context of the Russian political debate. The predominance of anti-Western attitudes is registered by all sociological instruments (Herber 2015, Volkov 2015, Goode 2015) as well as by discourse-analytical tools (Hopf 2016). It is also reflected in the recent conservative turn in Russian politics, ideology and legislation: such measures as the law banning 'propaganda of homosexuality', promotion of 'traditional family values' and other elements of Russia's 'spiritual sovereignty' seem to pay off in the sense of consolidating the social base of the regime (Sharafutdinova 2015).

It was the broad anti-Western consensus that made the annexation of Crimea and the support for the Donbas separatists possible and in some sense inevitable. It was prepared by a wide-ranging transformation of the Russian security discourse: while in the early Putin years Russians were inclined to see the weakness of their own state as the primary security challenge, by the end of the decade the external threats were seen as paramount and the domestic issues were redefined accordingly (Snetkov 2015). Even though, as Kingsbury shows in her chapter, the relative prominence of various threats varied with time and depended on the Kremlin's short-term priorities, Russian leadership never stopped worrying about subversive Western influence. Against the backdrop of the urban protest movement of 2011–2012, the Euromaidan came to be interpreted as anything but Ukraine's domestic matter: it was seen as instigated by the West and as a repetition of a future 'colour revolution' in Moscow.

This view, shared by the elites and by the pro-Putin masses alike, provided both the motivation and the legitimation for the dramatic foreign policy steps that followed. The Russian society sees itself as a victim of the West, which is aggressively promoting its own norms, institutions and values throughout post-Soviet space. The EU's Eastern Partnership initiative, NATO enlargement, US plans to create anti-ballistic missile defence, the supranational jurisdiction of the European Court for Human Rights, efforts at democracy promotion, support for LGBT rights movement and human rights in general are all seen as manifestations of Western expansionism. To defend its sovereignty, culture and independent moral standing, Russia needs to protect its sovereignty in all possible ways, but in particular by emphasising its unique values, strengthening 'spiritual bonds' within society (Putin 2012) and beefing up information security – a broad concept that includes control over media, social networks and private communications (Chernenko 2013; Morozov 2015, 103–134; Oliker 2016). If necessary, it also has to fight back to stave off the prospect of Ukraine's NATO membership and to make sure there are no NATO military bases in Crimea.

As a result, positive identification with Europe, which was dominant in Russia in the 1990s, was replaced by an equally forceful othering. While in late 1990s around two thirds of Russians believed their country must strive to become an EU member, this share dropped below 25 per cent after Putin's re-election in 2012, and the attitude to the EU underwent an even more drastic reversal in March 2014 (Gudkov 2015a; Levada Centre 2016c). In other Levada Centre polls, 59 per cent of respondents said they do not consider Russia a European country (Akopov 2016), while only 17 per cent believe that Russia must develop in the same way as Europe (Levada Centre 2016b, 46).

It would seem therefore that the Russian public shares the slogan 'Russia is not Europe', proclaimed by the Ministry of Culture in its April 2014 draft (Izvestia 2014). The reasoning behind this U-turn in identification is aptly summarised by the prominent nationalist historian Andrei Fursov:

who would want to associate oneself with the zone of today's Europe, where traditional values are destroyed, homosexualism is on the rampage, there is a migration crisis etc. Europe today is, in essence, a dying zone, where

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the population is unable to defend its cultural and religious identity. It is a post-Christian and post-European world, a graveyard of European civilisation (quoted in Andreeva 2016).

As a radical intellectual who, in fact, had for a number of years been preparing the ground for the change of the official discourse, Fursov is probably more dismissive about Europe than most Russians would be. The same message, however, has been repeated by the official propaganda, which has exploited widely shared fears (xenophobia, homophobia etc.) in a situation where the defenders of individual rights and non-traditional lifestyles are silenced and sometimes even repressed (Sharafutdinova 2014; Stella and Nartova 2016).

Yet it would be wise not to exaggerate the significance of this reversal. Firstly, as already pointed out, Russian society would still prefer to see relations with both the West and Ukraine improve (even though it blames the other side for that not happening). The 'material' aspects of the European way of life, such as economic prosperity and rule of law, still remain hugely attractive to the majority of the Russian citizens (Volkov 2015; Levada Centre 2016b, 47, 130).

Secondly, and most importantly, even as the modality of the identification with Europe changes, Russian national identity discourse remains Eurocentric. While the overall success of the officially declared 'pivot to Asia' remains subject to a heated debate, identity-wise it has definitely not made Russia an Asian country. Likewise, there is no distinct 'Eurasian' identity so far, unless one would like to use this label to refer to the attempt to liberate the country from its normative and economic dependence on Europe – among other things, by building a Eurasian Union as an alternative integration project (cf. Morozova 2009; Laruelle 2015a; Schenk, this volume).

The latter example, however, highlights the Eurocentric nature of the attempts to establish 'Eurasia' as a separate political space, as the Eurasian Union is explicitly modelled on the EU both in its design and in the surrounding discourse about the usefulness of economic integration (Dragneva and Wolczyk 2015). Speaking in more general terms, the only way to insist on the uniqueness of Russian 'traditional values' and 'spirituality' is by contrast with what is perceived as Western or European values. Both Europe and the West thus remain indispensable as key Others against which Russia's identity continues to be defined (for a detailed analysis, see Morozov 2015, 118–134).

In sum, Russian society – both the elites and the masses – remains focused on Europe as the primary Other, which is seen as a geographical space where history unfolds and as a model (positive, negative or both) of social development and well-being. The Ukrainian conflict is viewed against this broad background, as resulting from the irresponsible expansionism of the West and as indisputable proof that Russia must remain firm in defending its interests and sovereignty. This is perhaps the main reason for the high levels of approval of the Crimean annexation and other foreign policy steps taken by the Kremlin since 2014: they are seen not as aggressive but as defensive, while the true aggressor is the West in its main incarnations as the US, NATO and the EU.

Conclusion

Russian society remains fully behind President Putin's leadership. In particular, the decision to 'reunite' Crimea with Russia continues to enjoy overwhelming support, while all ensuing conflicts are blamed on the West. So far, this attitude has not been shattered by the economic crisis; confidence in the top leadership remains high in spite of omnipresent corruption, significant inflation eating away people's real income and blatant inequality.

As this chapter has argued, this phenomenon cannot be explained by simply reducing it to the effect of the official propaganda. The propaganda is certainly massive, but it hardly creates any new meanings: rather, it feeds on the mass common sense by picking certain elements from the vast and incongruous stock of popular beliefs and blowing them up, sometimes completely out of proportion.

The way the ordinary Russians comprehend the conflict in and with Ukraine is fundamentally conditioned by nationalism, but this nationalism is not necessarily xenophobic and aggressive. Kingsbury is right to point out in her chapter that the xenophobic attitudes are to a large extent deliberately promoted by the Kremlin at certain junctures and tend to subside when such campaigns are over. Besides, xenophobes are often racist and thus worry much less

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about Ukrainians than about labour migrants from Central Asia. In more general foreign policy terms, Russians would prefer to have good neighbourly relations with Ukraine, the EU and the US, but they are not happy with how their neighbours treat Russia as a nation, as well as their fellow 'compatriots' in post-Soviet states. While the concept of Russia as a divided nation is key to the understanding of Russian national identity and foreign policy, it is also extremely vague and open to a number of incompatible interpretations. It can be read in ethnic nationalist, imperialist and even civic terms, and all of these terms are present in the actual debate and policy documents. As a result, Russian nationalism can, in principle, be compatible with a rather broad range of actual policies.

Current Russian policy is both motivated and legitimised by the fear of Western expansionism. There is a serious and widely shared concern among Russians about the subversive effects of Westernisation for the spiritual integrity of the Russian nation. At the same time, Russian national identity discourse remains Eurocentric: all attempts to create an 'alternative' identity for Russia imply the need to explain how Russia is different from Europe.

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