Vladimir Putin's views on the Russian nation and Russian history as the reason for the aggression against Ukraine

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ABSTRACT:

Russia's aggression against Ukraine is perceived by many as simply an adventuristic endeavor of Vladimir Putin and the result of his desire to maintain his personal power in Russia itself and extend his influence beyond its borders. Proponents of such views try to explain Vladimir Putin's appeal to Russian chauvinism and its ideologues as purely situational and populist, and present the current regime in Russia as opportunistic and lacking a clear ideology and ideological goals. This paper however argues that Vladimir Putin's policy towards Ukraine, including the war unleashed against it, stems from his doctrinal views, which have been unequivocally outlined by him over the years in various speeches and articles, but ignored by the world due to a flippant attitude towards them. These views have not only a historical dimension, but also an ethnological one, as they are based on a certain and very specific understanding of Russian and Ukrainian ethnicities, which is an arbitrary combination of primordialist and constructivist arguments. Along with the presentation of these views themselves, the article demonstrates the discrepancy between the propaganda myths resulting from them and the actual facts about Russian and Ukrainian political and ethnic history.

KEYWORDS:

Ukraine, Russian Empire, Soviet Union, nationality, big Russian nation, Ukrainian nation, primordialism, constructivism

CONTEXT

The "solution of the Sudetenland question" by the Third Reich is a textbook example of aggression justified by the need to "reunite" one, "divided" people. What Vladimir Putin is trying to do today with respect to Ukraine is justified by a similar logic. With one important difference — Adolf Hitler did not deny the existence of the Czech people. On the contrary, he proceeded from the fact that the Sudetenland should "return" to Germany because the majority of their population is not ethnic Czechs, but ethnic Germans[1].

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1   "…it is most natural that we Germans are compelled to take an interest in this problem. Among the majority of nationalities that are being suppressed in this state there are 3,500,000 Germans. These Germans, too, are creatures of God. The Almighty did not create 3,500,000 Sudeten Germans to deliver them over to a hateful foreign regime at the head of a state that was constructed at Versailles. And He has not created 7,000,000 Czechs to act as the guardians of these Germans…" / Adolf Hitler — Rede auf dem Reichsparteitag

Likewise, Vladimir Putin also believes that the Ukrainian territories, which he is trying to forcefully incorporate into Russia, are populated by Russians. But not because they outnumber Ukrainians in those regions, but because he does not recognize the existence of a distinct Ukrainian nation[2]. What's noteworthy is that he reaches such a conclusion using an argumentation, which is a conflicting amalgamation of nationalism and anti-nationalism, thereby forming a hybrid idea of the revival of "historical Russia". In ethnological and historical terms such an ideology is an attempt to revise the results of the nation-building process that took place in the 20th century and gave rise to modern-day nation states within the Eastern Slavic realm of the former Russian Empire, employing disparate arguments of both primordialism and constructivism.

LEGAL, POLITICAL AND ETHNIC FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN UKRAINE

The existence of the state of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders is legitimized by three factors: legal, political and ethnological. In legal terms, independent Ukraine, within the borders of the former Ukrainian Soviet Republic, was recognized by dozens of states already during December 1991[3].

What's equally important is that Russia itself had recognized Ukraine within its borders that constituted the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic within the former

über die Sudetenkrise, 1938-09-12, https://archive.org/details/19380912AdolfHitlerRede AufDemReichsparteitagUeberDieSudetenkrise34m30s

2   The brochures of the Russian Ministry of Defense, prepared for the participants in the war against Ukraine and the administrative officials in the Russian-occupied territories openly claim that "Project Ukraine" is an artificial creation, just like the so-called "Ukrainian language", that from its inception it was built on the denial of Russia (as "anti-Russia"), everything Russian and Muscovite ("Moskal"), did not have a constructive program, and that "Ukraine is a political project created at the behest of the Austro-Hungarian government later supported by Germany and Poland at the beginning of the 20th century with the aim of weakening the Russian Empire and tearing away parts of its territories from it". The authors of the brochure proclaim: "No to 'Ukrainianism', 'Ukraine', 'Ukrainians', 'Ukrainization', yes to 'Lesser Russians' (*Malorossi*), their culture, traditions and language (dialects)!" See http://region.expert/manual/ for a detailed elaboration upon the difference between the concepts of "Lesser Russian" and "Ukrainian" within the notion of the "Russian World".

3   December 2 — Poland and Canada, December 3 — Hungary, December 4 — Lithuania and Latvia, December 5 — Russia, Bulgaria and Slovenia, December 6 — Cuba, December 8 — Czechoslovakia, December 9 — Estonia, December 12 — Georgia, December 16 — Turkey, December 18 — Armenia, Sweden and Norway, December 23 — Kazakhstan, December 25 — USA, Mexico, Iran, Tunisia, Israel, December 26 — Germany, Thailand, Brazil, India, Australia, December 27 — People's Republic of China, France, Vietnam, December 28 — Japan, Italy, December 30 — South Korea and Finland, December 31 — Great Britain, Spain, Greece (Website of the Institute of National Memory of Ukraine https://old.uinp.gov.ua/publication/viznannya-ukraini-yak-nezalezhnoi-derzhavi).

USSR. On November 19, 1990, the chairmen of the Supreme Soviets of the Russian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics, that were still part of USSR but were already drifting towards independence, had signed a treaty[4], which stated that these republics recognize each other as sovereign states and commit themselves to refrain from actions that could cause damage to state sovereignty of the other party (Article 3 of the Treaty). In this agreement, ratified by the Supreme Council of Russia on November 23, 1990, Russia and Ukraine formalized their intention to "develop their interstate relations based on the principles of sovereign equality, non-interference in internal affairs, renunciation of the use of force or economic methods of pressure" (Preamble), and also, that they mutually "recognize and respect the territorial integrity of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic within the borders currently existing within the USSR" (Article 6 of the Treaty).

On December 8, 1991, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, as the founding members of the Soviet Union, signed the Belovezh Accords[5], in which they stated that "The USSR as a subject of international law and geopolitical reality ceases to exist" (Preamble), declared that they were creating the Commonwealth of Independent States (Article 1) and confirmed that they "recognize and respect each other's territorial integrity and the inviolability of existing borders within the Commonwealth" (Article 5). The already independent and internationally recognized states of Russia and Ukraine confirmed the principles of the treaty they concluded on November 19, 1990, by signing, on June 23, 1992, the Agreement "On the Further Development of Interstate Relations"[6]. And in the agreement on friendship, cooperation and partnership between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, concluded on May 31, 1997[7], Russia and Ukraine confirmed their adherence to the principles of the two above-mentioned agreements. They also re-declared that they "build relations with each other based on the principles of mutual respect, sovereign equality, territorial integrity, inviolability of borders, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-use of force or threat of force, including economic and other methods of pressure, the right of peoples to freely dispose of their own destiny, non-interference in internal affairs, observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, cooperation between states, conscientious fulfillment of international obligations undertaken, as well as other generally recognized norms of international law "(Article 3), and also "respect the territorial integrity of each other and confirm the inviolability of existing borders between them" (Article 2).

The political legitimacy of Ukraine's independence within its internationally recognized borders was based on the free self-determination of its citizens of all

4   Source: Electronic collection of legal and regulatory documents of Russia. https://docs.cntd.ru/document/1900094

5   Source: Electronic collection of legal and regulatory documents of Russia, https://docs.cntd.ru/document/1900745

6   Source: Electronic collection of legal and regulatory documents of Russia, https://docs.cntd.ru/document/1901214

7   Source: Electronic collection of legal and regulatory documents of Russia. https://docs.cntd.ru/document/1902220

"nationalities"[8] in the referendum on its independence held on December 1, 1991. 90.32% of the 84.18% of all eligible voters who took part in the referendum voted for Ukraine's independence[9]. Moreover, the vast majority of residents of not only its western and central regions, but also of the eastern and southern regions, as well as Crimea, voted for independence. The results were as follows[10]: Donetsk Region — 73.78% in favor with 83.90% turnout, Luhansk Region — 80.65% in favor with 83.86% turnout, Zaporizhzhia Region — 80.59% with 90.66 turnout, Kherson Region[11] — 83.40% with 90.13% turnout, Mykolaiv Region — 84.10% with 89.45% turnout, Odesa Region — 75.01% with 85.38% turnout, Crimean Autonomous Republic — 67.50% with 54.19% turnout, the city of Sevastopol — 63.74% with 57.07% turnout.

Finally, from an ethnological perspective, the legitimacy of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders was justified by the predominance in most of its territory of people who identify as Ukrainians by "nationality", because the republics within the Soviet Union were formed and the borders between them were demarcated precisely in accordance with the ethno-national principle.

According to the last census conducted in the USSR in 1989, people of Ukrainian "nationality"[12] constituted 72.73% of the population of Ukraine[13]. Moreover, they formed the absolute majority not only in the western (e.g., Lviv — 90.37%) and central (e.g., Kiev — 89.40%) regions of Ukraine, which Vladimir Putin and some ideologues of his regime are willing to conditionally consider Ukrainian[14], but also in those which they consider unequivocally Russian. Accordingly, in Donetsk Region, ethnic Ukrainians accounted for 50.71%, in Luhansk Region (then Voroshilovgrad) — 51.88%, Zaporizhzhia Region — 63.07%, Kherson Region — 75.75%, Mykolaiv Region — 75.55% and Odesa Region — 54 .60%[15].

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8   In the Soviet Union, "nationality" as an ethnicity was a legal category, which was fixed in the passports of Soviet citizens and their personal files

9   Statement on the results of the all-Ukrainian referendum, December 1, 1991, https://web.archive.org/web/20131203032951/http://www.archives.gov.ua/Sections/15r-V_Ref/index.php?11

10   Ibid

11   In September 2022, Russia declared the four above-mentioned regions as parts of its territory based on the referendums held under occupation

12   This term is used for people who had the corresponding entry in the "nationality" column, which was mandatory in the Soviet passports, and/or those who chose the corresponding nationality during the population census

13   Official website of the all-Ukrainian census: http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/rus/results/general/nationality/

14   With the caveat that these Ukrainians are, in principle, Russians who have renounced their nationality and replaced it with an artificially one created by the efforts of the Poles and Austrians: "Everything changes. Including countries and societies. And it is likely that, part of one people, at some point of its development, due to a number of reasons and historical circumstances, may happen to regard itself as a separate nation." (Vladimir Putin, "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians", 2021)

15   Countrywide population census in the Soviet Union in 1989. Distribution of the urban and rural population of the regions of the republics of the USSR by sex and nationality. Ar-

The only region of Ukraine in which ethnic Ukrainians did not make up the majority of the population at the time of its independence was the Crimean region, withdrawn from Russian SFSR and transferred to Ukrainian SSR by decision of the Soviet leadership in 1954. In it, in 1989, that is, shortly before the abolition of the USSR, ethnic Ukrainians accounted for 25.75% compared to 67.05% of ethnic Russians (in the city of Sevastopol — 22.38% to 71.58%)[16]. However, even in spite of this, in 1991, the majority of Crimean voters (67.50%) and in particular Sevastopol residents (63.74%) voted for the independence of Ukraine[17], which means that it was supported by a significant part of the local ethnic Russian population. In addition, it's important to note that at the time of the initial national-territorial delimitation of the Russian and Ukrainian republics after the collapse of the Russian Empire, the ratio between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians[18] in Crimea was quite different from that at the end of the Soviet Union. According to the last census in the Russian Empire in 1897[19], 35.55% of the population of the modern territory of Crimea were Crimean Tatars, 33.11% "Great-Russians" and 11.84% "Little-Russians"[20]. Furthermore, at the time Crimea was part of a larger Taurida Governorate, in which "Great-Russians" were a minority — 27.9%, whereas as "Little-Russians" constituted 42.2% and Crimean Tatars 13.6%.

Why did this ratio change so dramatically by 1991? The reason is obvious. In 1944, by the decision of Stalin, all Crimean Tatars[21], as well as part of the Bulgarians, Greeks and Armenians[22], were deported from Crimea, and residents of Russia began to move in their place. As a result, according to the population census that followed in 1959, only 0.03% of Crimean Tatars remained in Crimea, whereas ethnic Russians already accounted for 71.43%. In view of this, the exclusion of Crimea from the Russian Soviet Republic and its transfer to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic within the Soviet Union in 1954 may seem odd, since in the period between the censuses preceding the depor-

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chival copy of May 31, 2017, at the Wayback Machine Demoscope https://web.archive.org/web/20170531070757/http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/resp_nac_89.php?reg=

16   Ibid

17   Statement on the results of the all-Ukrainian referendum, December 1, 1991

18   In the Russian Empire, ethnic Russians in the modern sense were called "Greate-Russians" (*Velikorossi*), and ethnic Ukrainians — "Little-Russians" (*Malorossi*). The ethnological aspects of these concepts are discussed below

19   Here and hereafter, references are made to "The results of the first general population census in the Russian Empire in 1897". Vishnevsky Institute of Demography at the Higher School of Economics http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/census.php?cy=0

20   Crimea during the pre-war and post-war period. Statistical compendium. Federal State Statistics Service on Crimea and Sevastopol, 2020. https://clck.ru/33L7bf

21   Decree of the State Committee of Defense of the USSR dated May 11, 1944 "On the Crimean Tatars". Source: https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Постановление_ГКО_№_5859сс_от_11.05.44

22   Decree of the State Committee of Defense of the USSR dated June 2, 1944 "On the eviction of Bulgarians, Greeks and Armenians from the territory of the Crimean ASSR". Source: https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Постановление_ГКО_№_5859сс_от_11.05.44

tation of the Crimean Tatars (in 1939)[23] and following it (1959)[24], the percentage of ethnic Ukrainians in Crimea increased from 13.68% only to 22.28%, but that of ethnic Russians from 49.58% to 71.43%. It is exactly this particular circumstance that makes the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 unfair in the eyes of Vladimir Putin[25]. However, the deportation of the indigenous inhabitants of Crimea, who were adapted to its landscape, and the post-war devastation brought the urgent necessity of economic restoration and, in particular, solving the water supply in the peninsula. Given its territorial connection with the south of Ukraine, the Soviet leadership decided to transfer it to the latter[26]. And those very same problems arose in Crimea again, in 2014, after its separation from southern Ukraine. This time around, Vladimir Putin wanted to solve them by annexing the entire southern Ukraine to Russia.

> Also, one needs to consider another important point. Although delimitation of the borders between the Russian and Ukrainian Soviet republics was mostly carried out based on the ethnic composition on those territories, this benchmark was not always followed. This is precisely what the ideologues of Putin's Russia and Putin himself allude to, arguing that a significant number of territories with a majority Russian population were included in Ukraine[27]. However, the census data suggests the exact opposite. As it turns out, in fact, more territories with majority Ukrainian population had been included in Russia than vice versa.

In all the governorates established by the Russian Empire on the territory of modern-day Ukraine, ethnic Ukrainians, according to the last census of 1897, made up the majority: 73.5% — in Volyn, 80.9% — in Podolsk, 79.2% — in Kiev, 66 .4% — in Chernigov,

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23 National population census in the USSR in 1939. Ethnic composition of the republics in the USSR. Institute of Demography at the Higher School of Economics http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_39.php?reg=5

24 National population census in the USSR in 1959. Ethnic composition of the republics in the USSR. Institute of Demography at the Higher School of Economics http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_59.php

25 Vladimir Putin: "Crimea was always Russian". Komsomolskaya Pravda. 18 March, 2014 https://www.kp.ru/daily/26207/3093047/

26 "In view of the territorial attraction of the Crimean Region to the Ukrainian SSR, their common economy combined with close economic and cultural ties between the Crimean Region and the Ukrainian SSR, the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR decides the following: It is to be considered expedient to transfer the Crimean Region from the RSFSR to the Ukrainian SSR", Decree of the Council of Ministers of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic from February 5, 1954. No. 156. ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Постановление_Совета_Министров_РСФСР_от_05.02.1954_№_156

27 Vladimir Putin: "…modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era. We know and remember well that it was shaped — for a significant part — on the territories of historical Russia. As proof it's enough to compare the extent of the territories reunited with the Russian state in the 17th century with those within the Ukrainian SSR at the time when it left the Soviet Union", Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", July 12, 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181

93% — in Poltava, 53.9% — in Kherson, 42.2% — in Taurida (with 27.9% of ethnic Russians), 80.6% — in Kharkiv, 68.9% — in Yekaterinoslav. Only in some separate districts within these governorates did ethnic Russians ("Great-Russians") make up the majority, as was the case in the Odessa district of the Kherson Governorate (37.4% of "Great-Russians" with 21.9% of "Little-Russians"), Mglinsky (78, 2%), Novozybkovsky (94.2%) and Starodubsky districts (92.9%) of the Chernigov Governorate, Kerch-Yenikalsky (59.8%) and Sevastopol (68.8%) townships of the Taurida Governorate.

However, all of them, with the exception of the Odessa district of the Kherson Governorate, which was an enclave with a Russian majority surrounded by predominantly Ukrainian districts, were transferred to the Russian soviet republic. At the same time, the territory of the border districts with an ethnically Ukrainian majority remained in the Russian soviet republic: Biryuchinsky (70.2%), Grayvoronsky (58.9%), Valuysky (51.1%), Novooskolsky (51.0%), Yeysky (73.9%), Yekaterinodar (51.8%), Temryuk (75.2%). The last three were part of the Kuban region, in which, on the whole, the "Little-Russians" made up the majority — 47.4% compared to 42.6% of the "Great-Russians", but which, nevertheless, was included in Soviet Russia, and not Soviet Ukraine. Therefore, if one adheres to the ethnic principle when determining the borders of the Russian and Ukrainian soviet republics, the distribution of territories between them did not take place to the detriment of Russia at all, but quite to the contrary.

PUTIN'S ARGUMENTATION: FROM STALIN'S LOGIC TO THE LOGIC OF THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

As we can see, the borders between Russia and Ukraine, recognized by both countries after the dissolution of the USSR and their transformation into independent states, represented the status quo that developed as a result of the nation-building process and national-territorial demarcation of the two countries and peoples that took place in the 20th century.

What, then, is the premise for Vladimir Putin's policy of delegitimizing Ukrainian statehood and the nation?

Vladimir Putin considers Ukrainian statehood, and to a large extent even the Ukrainian nationality itself, to be the product of the policies of Vladimir Lenin, to which he counterposes the views of Joseph Stalin on the optimal structure of the future multinational Soviet state that came to replace the former Russian Empire[28].

28 "Let me remind you that after the October Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent Civil War, the Bolsheviks began establishing a new statehood, and quite sharp disagreements arose between them. Stalin, who in 1922 combined the posts of the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the RCP and the People's Commissar for Nationalities, proposed building the country on the principles of autonomy, that is, giving the republics — i.e., the future administrative-territorial units, extensive powers when they were to join a single state. Lenin criticized this plan and offered to make concessions to the nationalists — "advocates of independence" as he called them. Eventually, it was these Leninist ideas of

In the early twenties of the last century, the Russian communists, having established subdued the independent national republics that had earlier emerged on the ruins of the Russian Empire, and turned them into soviet republics under their control, decided to unite them into a single state[29]. Lenin proposed the creation of a formally equal Union between Soviet Russia and those soviet republics that had not yet been included in it[30]. Stalin, instead, proposed to incorporate them into the soviet Russian republic, much like some other republics had already been included in it some time prior.

If Lenin spoke from the standpoint of uniting the formally equal national republics into the Soviet Union, Stalin, in contrast, spoke from the standpoint of preserving Greater Russia within approximately the borders of the former Russian Empire. Russians, nowadays, refer to the latter as "historical Russia", and thus consider Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who recognized the republics that arose on its ruins, as its destroyers. Putin himself also expressed similar views[31], however, in his opinion, "histori-

a confederate state structure backed by the mantra of the right of nations to self-determination up to secession that ended up forming the foundation of the Soviet statehood: first, in 1922, when they were enshrined in the Declaration on the Formation of the USSR, and then, after Lenin's death, in the Constitution of the USSR in 1924. This gives rise to many questions. The first and in fact the most important one being: why was it necessary to satisfy so generously any of those nationalist ambitions that were gaining traction on the outskirts of the former empire? To transfer to the newly, and often arbitrarily, formed administrative units — i.e., the Soviet republics, huge territories that often had nothing to do with them at all. I repeat, to transfer those territories together with the population of historical Russia. Moreover, these administrative units, were as a matter of fact, given the status and form of nation state-like formations. Again, I ask myself: why was it necessary to make such generous gifts, which the most ardent nationalists had never even dreamed of before, and even give the republics the right to secede from the unitary state without any pre-conditions? From the vantage point of the historical fate of Russia and its peoples, the Leninist principles of state building turned out to be not just a mistake, but, as one would say, much worse than a mistake. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, this became absolutely obvious", (Address of the President of the Russian Federation, February 21, 2022) http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828

29   The Formation of the Soviet Union: communism and nationalism 1917–1923 / Richard Pipes, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England, 1954, 1964, sixth printing, VI The establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, p. 242–294

30   At the same time, some of the national republics were fully incorporated into soviet Russian republic and subsequently became autonomous republics within it, while the republics nominally independent of Russia received the status of union republics within the USSR, and not within Russia itself — to the disappointment of Vladimir Putin and his followers

31   In 2012, Vladimir Putin wrote: "Our national problems and those pertaining to do with immigration are a direct consequence of the dissolution of the USSR, which, in its essence, is historically the greater Russia, which traces its origins back to the 18th century when it was formed" (Russia and the National Question, Vladimir Putin, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 23.01 .2012 https://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html)

cal Russia" after its collapse in 1917, was actually recreated in the form of the Soviet Union, because, although in the course of the dispute between Lenin and Stalin, the former had formally prevailed, in practice it was the approach of the latter that had eventually won[32]. Formally, the federal USSR was in fact a centralized state, which is apparently why Putin considers it a form of "historical Russia."[33] However, because, at the end of the day, it was Lenin's approach that had found formal recognition, the national republics later eventually seized the opportunity and left the USSR at the end of the 20th century, taking advantage of the diminishing power of the Communist Party in Moscow. Which, according to Putin, resulted in "historical Russia losing 40% of its territory".[34]

But what Putin regards as an extremely hard and unacceptable loss for "historical Russia" is the loss of Ukraine, particularly those of its territories that he considers unequivocally Russian. This, according to Putin, is also the consequence of Lenin's policies, whom he considers the creator of Ukraine[35]. And, in regard, he appeals not so much to Joseph Stalin, but rather to the reality that existed in the Russian Empire before the 1917 revolution.

It must be noted that unlike the Soviet Union, the Russian Empire did not consist of national republics. Even if the Grand Duchy of Finland, the Kingdom of Poland and the Emirate of Bukhara within it could still be considered some sort of national autonomies, the rest of its territory consisted of governorates — i.e., administrative units that did not have a national character. From Putin's statements on this topic, it follows that he considers such an arrangement of "historical Russia" to be the optimal one[36]. By the way, not only the early Joseph Stalin would agree with him in this, who

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32 "In practice, Stalin actually fully implemented not Lenin's, but precisely his own ideas of state structure. But he did not introduce the corresponding changes to the legal documents, like the Constitution of the country, and he did not formally revise the proclaimed Leninist principles upon which the USSR was built. Yes, there was no need for this indeed. Under the totalitarian regime everything worked as intended anyway, with an added bonus that it looked beautiful, attractive and even super-democratic to the outside world. It is nevertheless very sad that the legal foundations, upon which our statehood was formed, were not duly cleansed of the odious, utopian, revolution-inspired fantasies that are destructive for any normal country." (Vladimir Putin, Address of the President of Russia, February 21, 2022)

33 Answering a question in 2021 about his most important accomplishment, Vladimir Putin said that he considers it to be the re-assembly, the restoration of Russia as a unitary centralized state (Putin spoke about the main milestone of his presidency, Vesti.Ru, March 21, 2021, https://www. vesti.ru/article/2539566)

34 See "Putin called the collapse of the USSR a tragedy", December 12, 2021, TASS. https://tass.ru/politika/13179271

35 "...Soviet Ukraine arose as a result of the policy of the Bolsheviks, therefore, even today, one can with good reason call it "Ukraine named after Vladimir Ilyich Lenin". Since he is its author and architect" (Vladimir Putin, Address of the President of Russia, February 21, 2022)

36 In 2012, during his press conference, Vladimir Putin stated the following: "In the Russian Empire there was no division into national-territorial formations, there were simply gov-

in 1913[37] advocated the creation of territorial rather than national autonomies within Russia. Since the corresponding work of Stalin was written and published as part of a debate between Russian communists and Austrian social democrats, it basically reflected the common view of the former, including Lenin, who had sharply expressed his negative attitude towards the federalization of Russia[38]. But after seizing power during the collapse of "historical Russia" and the civil war that followed, they were forced to change their approach in order to be able to return the territories where national states and autonomies were proclaimed under the control of Soviet Russia. Therefore, in 1921, even Stalin himself proposed including those regions into the Soviet Federal Russia, not as territorial, but rather as national autonomies.

However, although Putin is willing to regard all the other national autonomies within Russia and the majority of independent post-Soviet nation states as necessary evil, his attitude towards Ukraine is quite different[39]. In his view, the mistake, or rather the crime the Bolsheviks committed was not only in that they created Ukraine, which prior to that had not existed within the Russian Empire as a national entity, but the Ukrainian nation itself, which had not been recognized as a separate nationality within it[40].

It is for this reason that Vladimir Putin does not attach any importance to the population census data, according to which both in the Soviet Union and in the Russian Empire, on the territory of not only the central and western, but also the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, carriers of Ukrainian nationality (in the USSR) or "Little-Russian dialect" (in the Russian Empire) constituted the majority[41]. According

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ernorates. This applied both to the territories that are now part of the Russian Federation and to those that are not. For example, there was the TiflisGovernorate. And it functioned well" ("Putin: Changes into territorial divisions cannot be associated with the solution of the national question", December 20, 2012, https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1606900.html)

37 "Marxism and the national question", Joseph Stalin, January 1913, Enlightenment magazine

38 "In principle, we are against the federation as it weakens economic ties and is an unsuitable structure fo a single state. Do you want to separate? Get the hell out if you can accept severing the economic ties, or rather, if the oppression and frictions caused by the "cohabitation" are such that they ruin the economic ties. Don't want to separate? Then sorry, but don't decide for me, don't think that you have a ‚right' to a federation" (Letter from Lenin to Shaumyan, 1913, see http://libelli.ru/works/48-6.htm)

39 "Despite all these injustices, deceit and outright robbery committed against Russia, our people, yes, exactly the people itself, recognized the new geopolitical realities that arose after the collapse of the USSR and thereby recognized the new independent states" (Vladimir Putin, Address of the President of Russia, February 21, 2022. Later within the same speech he proceeds to specifically delegitimize Ukrainian statehood, see below)

40 "Objective facts indicate that Little Russian cultural identity was actively developing within the Russian Empire as part of a larger Russian nation that includes Greate-Russians, Little-Russians and Belarusians" (Vladimir Putin, "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians", 2021)

41 Whereas in the Soviet Union the nationality of a citizen was officially documented, which from the second half of the 20th century was legally established by the nationality of his

to Putin, they were all part of one "larger Russian nation", which he, alongside with many ideologues of the Russian Empire, considers consisting of "Greate-Russians, Little-Russians and Belarusians."

THREE SEPARATE NATIONS OR ONE TRIUNE NATION: CONTRADICTORY COMBINATION OF PRIMORDIALISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM IN VLADIMIR PUTIN'S THINKING

After the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 and the ensuing formation of new national republics on its former territory, what remained as Russia was approximately the territory of the former Tsardom of Muscovy of the 17th centrury. At the same time, within the East Slavic realm that, from the 12th to 18th centuries, had constituted the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and since 1569 had been united with the Kingdom of Poland into Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Rzeczpospolita), two separate national republics emerged, namely Ukraine and Belarus.

Within the Russian Empire, which neither had a proper constitution in general nor, in particular, a firm category pertaining to national sovereignty, the national statuses neither of Russia, in a larger sense or narrower one relating to the territory of former Tsardom of Muscovy[42], nor of Ukraine or Belarus were legally fixed. The same applies to the status of separate nations; both the Russian nation in any possible interpretations, be it civil or ethnic, and those nations that legally ascertained their status after the collapse of the Russian Empire and the formation of national republics, be it Ukrainians, Belarusians or Russians in a narrow sense[43].

The Code of Laws of the Russian Empire, which basically served as its quasi-constitution, did not even mention the Russian people as such, as the country's population was grouped into various confessional quasi-ethnic groups of "natural inhabitants that make up the urban and rural population", "aliens" and "foreigners residing in the Empire"[44]. Yet, it was not all of the ethnic "non-Russians" who were classified as "aliens", but rather only the non-Christian nomads and Jews[45].

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or her parents (or one of them depending on their choice, if the parents had different nationalities), in the Russian Empire it was the confessional affiliation that was being recorded in the documents, and in the 1897 census also the native language, including separate "Greate-Russian" and "Little-Russian" "dialects"

[42] On an ad hoc basis it was called "Great Russia" (*Velikorossia*), whereas Ukraine was called "Little Russia" (*Malorossia*)

[43] In the population censuses conducted in the Soviet Union, the nationality "Russian" appears from 1926 onwards and is applied to those who were formerly referred to as "Greate-Russians". See "Countrywide population census of 1926. National composition of the population in the regions of the RSFSR". Vishnevsky Institute of Demography at the Higher School of Economics http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_nac_26.php

[44] The Code of Laws of the Russian Empire, Volume IX, Book One, Article 1. https://civil.consultant.ru/reprint/books/205/1.html

[45] The Code of Laws of the Russian Empire, Volume IX, Section One, Chapter Five, Item 762. https://civil.consultant.ru/reprint/books/205/87.html

In the Supremely Approved Basic State Laws of April 23, 1906, adopted on the backdrop of the revolution of 1905, although there is still no mention neither of the Russian people nor of the people of Russia as a source of national sovereignty, the term "Russian subjects" starts appearing, which is meant to refer to all the subjects of the Russian tsar, irrespective of their nationality or religion[46].

Unofficially, however, there was an understanding that the Russian people in the ethno-confessional sense consisted of Greate-Russians, who corresponded to the Orthodox Slavic-speaking inhabitans of the Little-Russian who are called today as ethnic Ukrainians, who previously were called "Litvins". It's moreover important to note that the nationally conscious members of those Little-Russians began calling themselves "Ukrainians" already in the 19th century[47].

It's easy to notice that all those ethnonyms are derived from the root "Rus", which indicates that the origin of these ethnicties trace back the ancient politico-cultural formation called "Rus'", which is sometimes referred to as "Kyivan Rus'" in view of the fact that Kyiv was its capital from the 9th century onwards. After its destruction by the troops of Batu Khan and the ensuing collapse in the 13th century, it essentially ended up being divided into two large parts; i.e., the western one, which eventually ended up in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and the eastern one, which became the vassal of the Golden Horde. This political division consolidated the cultural division, the prerequisites for which existed in ancient Rus' even before the Mongol invasion[48]. For instance, according to a comprehensive genetic-linguistic study by an international team of scientists in 2015, already in the 6th century there was a noticeable difference between the phonetic arrays of the ancestors of the future Russian and Ukrainian/Belarusian languages[49]. The latter, called "Ruska mova", was the official language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and is regarded today by some linguists as Old Ukrainian or Old Belarusian[50].

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46   Highly approved basic state laws, 23.04.1906, https://constitution.garant.ru/history/act1600-1918/5207/

47   "Ukrainian question in the Russian Empire", Aleksey Miller, Kyiv, Laurus, 2013

48   Regathering the Russian lands: the rationale for Putin's war in Ukraine, Derek Offord, The Criric, November 2022 https://thecritic.co.uk/issues/november-2022/regathering-the-russian-lands/

49   Genetic Heritage of the Balto-Slavic Speaking Populations: A Synthesis of Autosomal, Mitochondrial and Y-Chromosomal Data, Alena Kushniarevich, Olga Utevska, Marina Chuhryaeva, Anastasia Agdzhoyan, Khadizhat Dibirova, Ingrida Uktveryte, Märt Möls, Lejla Mulahasanovic, Andrey Pshenichnov, Svetlana Frolova, Andrey Shanko, Ene Metspalu, Maere Reidla, Kristiina Tambets, Erika Tamm, Sergey Koshel, Valery Zaporozhchenko, Lubov Atramentova, Vaidutis Kučinskas, Oleg Davydenko, Olga Goncharova, Irina Evseeva, Michail Churnosov, Elvira Pocheshchova, Bayazit Yunusbayev, Elza Khusnutdinova, Damir Marjanović, Pavao Rudan, Siiri Rootsi, Nick Yankovsky, Phillip Endicott, Alexei Kassian, Anna Dybo, The Genographic Consortium, Chris Tyler-Smith, Elena Balanovska, Mait Metspalu, Toomas Kivisild, Richard Villems, Oleg Balanovsky, September 2, 2015, https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0135820

50   See On the dialectal basis of the Ruthenian literary language, Daniel Bunčić, Die Welt der Slaven LX, 2015, 276–289, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/83527423.pdf

Between the 13th and 18th centuries, these two parts of the former Kyivan Rusʻ, which was a relatively unitary formation at the time, ended up being separated into two different cultural-political realms and have developed within them, which strengthened their views of being distinct ethno-cultural polities different from each other. Despite the fact that inhabitants of each of these parts associated themselves with Rusʻ, and their educated circles sometimes retained the idea of the genealogical unity of all its parts, in everyday life they referred to the representatives of the other part by other ethnonyms. Not only were the ancestors of modern-day Russians called "Muscovites" and "Katsaps"[51] in the territory of present-day Ukraine, but the reverse was also true, such that the ancestors of modern-day Ukrainians were called "Cherkasy" and those of modern-day Belarusians were called "Litvins" ("Lithuanian people")[52] in the territory of present-day Russia, that is in the Tsardom of Muscovy. The idea of their ethnic unity begins to be introduced only starting from the 18th century in Russia, after the annexation of the territory of present-day Ukraine, and interestingly, by the natives of the latter like Feofan Prokopovich, who, thereby, were trying to accomplish the corporate and geopolitical aims of its clergy in the confrontation against the Catholics of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth[53]. Moreover, it should be noted that with time this idea came to be opposed not only by the "Little-Russians", who began calling themselves Ukrainians, but also by the representatives of "Muscovites" of old, who, contrary to the imperial mainstream were pointing to pronounced ethnic differences between the two peoples, like, for instance, the editor of the popular journal "Moscow Telegraph" — Nikolay Polevoy, who in 1830 wrote the book "Little Russia" on this topic[54].

Russian Empire, like the Austrian Empire or Ottoman Empire[55], was an absolutist monarchy and a multiethnic rather than a nation state. But as it had to deal with the national awakening movements that were spreading throughout Europe in the 19th century, its authorities and ideologues made attempts to nationalize its subjects and turn them into Russian people, much like, concurrently, the Ottoman Empire was attempting to achieve similar results with the idea "Ottomanism" and Austrian Empire with its official patriotism. Since by the end of its existence the "Greate-Rus-

51 "Ukrainian question" in the policy of the authorities and Russian public opinion (second half of the 19th century), Miller A.I., St. Petersburg: Aletheia, 2000, p. 36–37

52 The meaning of the terms "Cherkasy" and "Lithuanian people" used in the official records of the 17th century Russia to refer to the population of present-day Ukraine within Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Andrey Papkov, 2010. https://www.academia.edu/43842591

53 Plokhy S. The Two Russias of Teofan Prokopovych // Mazepa and his time / Ed. by G. Siedina. — Alessandria, 2004. — p. 333–366. About the subsequent imperial career of the fatherland and its semantic field, see Schierle I. ʻSyn otecestvaʼ: ʻDer wahre Patriotʼ // Russische Begriffsgeschichte der Neuzeit / Thiergen P. (Hrsg.). — KolnWeimar-Wien, 2006. — p. 347–367

54 "Little Russia, its inhabitants and history", Nikolay Polevoy (Moscow Telegraph, 1830, no. 17–18)

55 About the historical similarities of their situations see After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building: The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, Karen Barkey, Mark Von Hagen, 1997

sians" made up only 44.31% of the population of the Russian Empire, it was expedient from the demographic and geopolitical standpoint to group them together with "Little-Russians" and Belarusians into one single nation. This would thus increase the proportion of such a "triune Russian nation" to 66.8% of the population and would allow to capitalize on the ethnic majority in the western provinces of the empire that were bordering the Central-Eastern Europe and provided a gateway to the Balkans. To achieve this it was necessary to claim that the Russian people was already formed during times of the ancient Rus' and never ceased to exist since then, always striving towards unity, whereas the cultural differences between "Greate-Russians", "Little-Russians" and Belarusians created artifically and by foreign influence. For this reason, distinct Ukrainian and Belarusian national identities were subjected to repression in the Russian Empire[56].

Nevertheless, like the other national movements that had been repressed in the Russian Empire, Ukrainian and Belarusian national movements did prevail in the end and outlived the empire, which collapsed in 1917, thereby opening the way for the national awakening and self-determination of its many constituent peoples. The Russian communists, who initially opposed the creation of national autonomies within Russia, which had arisen against their will, were nevertheless forced to accept their formal recognition within the framework of Soviet proletarian internationalism in order to establish political control over them and to thwart the rising nationalism[57]. In line with that framework, Soviet historiography posited that within the ancient Rus' it was rather the nascent Russian people that emerged[58], instead of the Russian nation itself, whereas between the 13th — 18th centuries three "brotherly" east Slavic nations evolved, that traced their origins to that nascent polity, and co-existed separately until they later united within one state — i.e., Russians (former Greate-Russians), Ukrainians (former Little-Russians) and Belarusians. Later three separate national republics were created based on the recognition of this very fact and their borders within the USSR were demarcated accordingly, as opposed to the policy of their assimilation that had earlier been implemented in the Russian Empire.

In his article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", Vladimir Putin explicitly states that the recognition by the communists of three different nations, with a distinct Ukrainian nation among them, was a mistake, and proclaims a return to the concept of a "large Russian nation" consisting of Greate-Russians, Little-Russians and Belarusians[59]. One might be tempted to designate such view as primordialist, since it assumes ethnic continuity of a nation, which has ostensibly emerged in the 9th century already, and rejects the constructivist notion that Ukrainian and Belarusian nations have formed in the 19th — 20th cen-

56 "Ukrainian question in the Russian Empire", Aleksey Miller, 2013
57 The Formation of the Soviet Union: communism and nationalism 1917–1923 / Richard Pipes, p. 21–50, p. 107–289
58 Tokarev S.A. Ethnography of the nations of the USSR, Moscow University Press, 1958
59 See article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", July 12, 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181

turies, which Putin claims occurred due to the machinations of Polish and Austrian ruling circles[60].

However, Putin's views and those of other proponents of the idea of a "large triune Russian nation" do not pass the test of classical primordialism, but rather represent a unique combination of constructivism and primordialism. In particular, if one defines a nation based on such primordialist criteria as ethnic language[61] and genetics[62], one will realize that already during the times of ancient Rus' its population was rather multiethnic, which later brought about the emergence of various nations on its territory. Vladimir Putin and his supporters don't deny this, and therefore claim that a centralized state together with Orthodox Christian faith and culture have, with time, molded that multiethnic population into a single nation[63]. Basically, in this regard, they come accross as classical constructivists. What should logically follow from this is that, if the state creates the nation, and that state had disintegrated in the 13th century, then, as Soviet historians believed, the nations that formed on that territory must be distinct because in the following centuries its inhabitants lived in different states[64]. However, at this stage, Putin and his followers abandon the constructivist thinking and switch to quasi-primordialist positions claiming that having been formed once, under a centralized government, that Russian nation will exist forever, even if that government later disappears, and will continuously "strive for re-unification"[65].

Ukrainian and Belarusian historians and national theorists, on the contrary, proceed from an integral primordialism, which congruently transitions into a consistent constructivism/modernism. In this vein, the foundation upon which modern nations arise in modern times is seen as distinct cultural and anthropological features that already differed between different parts of the population within the realm of the ancient Rus'. In particular, for Belarusian theorists, the basis of the ethnic specificity of their people is the Balto-Slavic synthesis, in particular, embodied in the cultural and anthropological type of the tribal union of the Krivichs[66]. Soviet Ukrainian[67], as well

60 "20 Questions to Putin", Vladimir Putin's interview with journalist Andrei Vandenko, August 31, 2020 https://youtu.be/59FwhUqbNcE, for the main theses of the interview on this topic, see "One people and Austrian intelligence services: Putin made scandalous statements about the origin of Ukrainians" , February 21, 2020, https://24tv.ua/ru/odin_narod_i_specsluzhby_avstrii_putin_sdelal_skandalnye_zajavlenija_o_proishozhdenii_ukraincev_n1285443

61 Herder, J.G. (1966) Essay on the origin of language (A. Gode, trans.) In J. Rousseau and J.G. Herder On the Origin of Language (pp. 85/166). Chicago: University of Chicago Press

62 Van den Berghe, Pierre L., The ethnic phenomenon, 1981, Elsevier Science Publishing Co., Inc.

63 Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", July 12, 2021

64 Tokarev S.A. Ethnography of the nations of the USSR, Moscow University Press, 1958, pp. 26–27

65 Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", July 12, 2021

66 Lastovsky V.U. (Vlast) Short history of the Belarus/ V.U.Lastovsky.— Vilnya: Drukarnja Marcina Kuhty, 1910. — Reprint. — Minsk: University, 1993

67 Dyachenko, V. D. Anthropological structure of the Ukrainian people. — Naukova dumka, Kiiv, 1965

as Soviet Russian anthropologists[68], pointed out the differences between the tribes of the Drevlians, Polians and Severyans, who determined the cultural and anthropological distinctness of Ukrainians, on the one hand, and the tribes of Ilmen Slavs, Vyatichs and Krivichs[69], who determined the distinctness of Russians in a narrow sense. The question of intermixing of these Slavic tribes with the non-Slavic[70] ones is also a point of contention; whereas a lot of ideologues of Ukrainian nationalism point to the intermixture of the Slavic ancestors of present-day Russians with the autochtonous Finno-Ugric tribes that lived in the north-east of Rus', certain Russian theorists, in turn, attempt to explain the de-Russification of Ukrainians not only with Polish cultural influence, but also with their intermixture with nomadic Turkic tribes that used to populate southern Ukraine[71].

One way or another, the unofficial attempts of amalgamating the "Greate-Russians" and "Little-Russians" into one single nation notwithstanding, the ethnic differences between them were obvious even to the ruling circles of the Russian Empire. That's why, already in the the population census of 1897, the native speakers of "Greate-Russian", "Little-Russian" and Belarusian "dialects" were grouped separately. It was the results of this census that subsequently became the basis for delineating the ehtnic territories of each of these people, which approximately corresponded to the future borders of their national republics.

UKRAINE WITHIN THE USSR AND AFTER: BETWEEN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL

However, while interpreting the formation of the Ukrainian and Russian republics after the collapse of the Russian Empire, Vladimir Putin again switches to the positions of radical constructivism or etatism, appealing to the notion of statehood and common state culture, within the context of which the ethnic differences between the "Greate-Russians" and "Little-Russians" lose their meaning and become insignificant. After all, according to his thinking, the crucial factor that underlined the inclusion of Ukraine into Russia in the 20th century, despite its ethnic composition, was the fact that the independent state proclaimed by the Ukrainian national revolutionaries could not defend itself[72] and became part of the USSR, which he considers a form of historical Russia.

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68   "Origin of the Peoples of Eastern Europe", Alekseev V.P., Institute of Ethnography named after Mikloukho-Maclay, 1969, Chapter 5 "Craniological type of East Slavic peoples and their origin", pp. 162–204

69   The latter are the ancestors of both part of Belarusians and part of Russians

70   "Origin of the Peoples of Eastern Europe", Alekseev V.P.

71   "Origin of Ukrainian separatism", N. Ulyanov, 1966, Madrid, New York

72   "The case of the UPR (Ukrainian People's Republic — V.S.) shows how unstable were various kinds of quasi-state formations that arose on the territory of the former Russian Empire during the Civil War and associated turmoil" ("On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians", Vladimir Putin, 2021); "It is also important to understand that Ukraine,

On November 7, 1917, after the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd and overthrew the Russian Provisional Government, the Central Council of Ukraine (Rada), which had previously been in negotiations with that government, proclaimed the Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR). The official proclamation stated that the republic is being created on the territories of those provinces (governorates) of the Russian Empire that were majority Ukrainian, with the addition that separate parts of other provinces where Ukrainians constitute the majority can decide to join it in line with the notion of self-determination[73]. This decision was met with hostility by those who would later form the two sides of the Russian Civil War, namely both by the so-called "whites" (anti-communists) and the so-called "reds" (communists), although formally they would indicate different reasons for their rejection of the UPR and other similar independent states and national autonomies that were proclaimed on the ruins of the Russian Empire.

General Anton Denikin, who commanded the "whites" forces operating on the territory of Ukraine, openly spoke out denying not only Ukrainian statehood, but also an independent Ukrainian nation, saying that he was fighting for a "United and Indivisible Russia" and "the unity of the Russian tribe"[74]. In contrast to the Russian "whites", the Russian "reds" publicly recognized the rights of the peoples of the former Russian Empire (including the Ukrainian people) to self-determination, however, they sought to ensure that it was realized in the form of Soviet republics under their control. In the "civil war"[75] that was fought on the territory of Ukraine, the opposing forces were Ukrainian national republicans, Russian "whites", Russian "reds", who had proclaimed the Ukrainian People's Republic of Soviets as opposed to the UPR, and also the anarchist-internationalists in the south of Ukraine led by Nestor Makhno. In the end, as a result of this multilateral confrontation with the participation of various internal and external forces on the territory of the former Russian Empire, both the "white" Russians and most of the non-communist national republics were defeated by the Russian communists, who proceeded to establish their control over much of the territory of the former Russian Empire[76].

in fact, has never had a stable tradition of true statehood" (Address of the President of the Russian Federation, 2022)

73 "The territory of the Ukrainian People's Republic includes lands populated mainly by Ukrainians: Kiev region, Podolia, Volyn, Chernihiv region, Poltava region, Kharkiv region, Yekaterinoslav region, Kherson region, Taurida (excluding Crimea). The final determination of the borders of the Ukrainian People's Republic, regarding the accession of parts of Kursk, Chełm, Voronezh and other adjacent provinces and regions, where Ukrainians constitute the majority, must be established with the consent of the people residing in those territories", III Universal of the Ukrainian Central Rada, November 7, 1917, https://likbez.org.ua/iii-decree-ukrainian-central-rada.html

74 See "Address of Denikin to the people of Lesser Russia", August 12, 1919, https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Обращение_Деникина_к_населению_Малороссии

75 In this particular case, the term "civil war" reflects the view of Russian historiography, while Ukrainian historiography sees it as the war of Ukrainian people for national liberation against the Russian invaders.

76 With the exception of the Baltic states, Finland and Poland (including its west-Ukrainian and west-Belarusian territories it contained back then in 1939)

It bears noting however that, according to some scholars of the Russian Civil War[77], the "reds" managed to prevail over the "whites" in no small part due to their flexibility with regards to the national question, which in turn earned them the sympathies of the intellectual elites of the non-Russian nationalitites; the sympathies that were rooted both in the weakness of their own states and the hostility of the "whites" to any kind of national self-determination. Consequently, once in power, the "reds" replaced the governerates of the former Russian Empire with national republics controlled by Moscow — some as autonomous states within Soviet Russia, and others as its formal coequals within the USSR, which was established on December 30, 1922 by Soviet Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Transcaucasia.

The realities of the Soviet Ukraine and the policy of the Soviet Moscow towards it were thus determined by this duality of the national and the communist-international. The nationalizations were followed by the attempts to root out nationalism, and the creation of Ukrainian national cadres alternated with forced Russification[78]. Moreover, after the division of Poland by the Soviet Union and the Third Reich, and the ensuing annexation of its Ukrainian and Belarusian parts by the USSR, the national liberation struggle of Ukrainians, which at that time was taking place in Polish Ukraine, spread to Soviet Ukraine and continued there until 1950s. Therefore, Ukrainian nationalism remained an existential enemy of the Soviet regime[79], but at the end of the 80s of the last century, two mortal blows were dealt to the latter in Soviet Moscow itself — first by Mikhail Gorbachev, who began the democratization of the USSR, and then by Boris Yeltsin, who, in his struggle with the Soviet leadership decided to bet on the Russian Republic and the abolition of the USSR.

Vladimir Putin has on several occasions called the collapse of the USSR the greatest geopolitical catastrophy of the 20th century[80]. But not because he considers it the optimal form of government (it should be remembered that he does not share the views of its creator — i.e., Lenin, but rather agrees with Stalin in that the national republics should have been included in Russia), but because he considers it as a "form of historical Russia"[81]. In such an assessment of the USSR, Putin is in fact correct in many ways, albeit not formally. Officially, the USSR was a union of coequal nations with the right to self-determination (Putin considers it a mistake)[82], which formed an important part in the self-awareness not only of the national intelligentsia, but also

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77 The Formation of the Soviet Union: communism and nationalism 1917–1923 / Richard Pipes, p. viii

78 "Kremlin's Empire: Soviet-style colonialism", Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov, Prometeus-Verlag, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, 1988, Part II Russia, USSR and Ukraine, pp. 112–142

79 Ibid

80 Putin explained why he called the collapse of the Soviet Union the greatest catastrophy of the 20th century, 13 June, 2017: https://ria.ru/20170613/1496353896.html. Putin called the collapse of the USSR the greatest geopolitical catastrophy, 25 April, 2005: https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2005/04/25/4387750/

81 "Soviet Union is historical Russia, claims Putin" 17 June, 2022 https://ria.ru/20220617/sssr-1796292184.html

82 "Putin clarified his words that Lenin's ideas destroyed the USSR", 25 January 2016 https://ria.ru/20160125/1365138857.html

of the communist elites of those Soviet republics. What's more, that self-awareness was being offended when it was becoming clear that all these assurances do not correspond to reality[83]. That is why, after the collapse of the communist dictatorship, those national-communist sentiments in the Soviet republics quickly turned into national-anti-communist, aimed at complete liberation not only from the Russian Empire, but also from the Soviet Union as its actual reincarnation.

FAILED NATION-BUILDING AND RESSENTIMENT IN THE "HISTORICAL RUSSIA"

As the Russian Republic separated from the Soviet Union, for some time, initially, the idea was gaining traction that Russia should abandon not only communism, but also its imperial past completely and be re-built as a post-imperial nation state[84]. But this was hampered by the fact that Russia, despite the clear predominance of ethnic Russians (former "Greate-Russians") on its territory, who, unlike in the Russian Empire and in the Soviet Union, where they accounted for less than half of the total population, now accounted for a whopping 81.5%[85], still contained not only millions of indigenous non-Russians but also significant chunks of territories which constituted the autonomous nation states of these peoples (former autonomous Soviet republics)[86]. Also no less of a problem was the lack of understanding of how the national identity of ethnic Russians can be formed with the rejection of the imperial heritage. In

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83 In an interview with Ukrainian TV presenter Dmitry Gordon in 2016, the first president of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk, complained that at his business trips to Moscow during the Soviet era he was confronted with the "Greate-Russian" chauvinism of the Soviet leadership, he just could not openly talk about it then (Servant of Two Ukraines, Kommersant, 11 May 2022, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5347437)

84 See "Russia all alone by itself", Igor Shafarevich, «Nash Sovremennik», 1992, № 1

85 Countrywide population census in the Soviet Union in 1989. Breakdown by gender and nationality of the urban and rural population of the republics of the USSR. Archival copy from 31 May 2017 on Wayback Machine Demoscope https://web.archive.org/web/20170531070757/http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/resp_nac_89.php?reg=

86 In the Soviet Union, the republics were of two categories — (i) the Soviet republics (SSR), 15 in total, which constituted the Soviet Union and formally were its coequal members, and (ii) autonomous republics within those Soviet republics, in particular within the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic. After the transformation of the latter into an independent Russian Federation after the collapse of the USSR, the autonomous republics within it became simply republics, which are referred to as states in paragraph 2 of article 5 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation. Prior to Russia's annexation of parts of Ukrainian territory in 2014 and 2022, there were, in total, 21 such republics within the Russian Federation, named after the peoples native to their territory (such as Chechnya, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, etc.). In addition, Russian Federation included and still includes one autonomous region ("Oblast") — i.e., Jewish Autonomous Oblast, and several autonomous districts ("Okrugs") — i.e., Nenets, Khanty-Mansiysk, Chukotka and Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrugs. Moreover, during the presidency of Vladimir Putin, certain autonomous

Turkey, during its transformation from a multinational empire into a Turkish na-
tion state, this problem was solved through a revaluation of Turkish identity from
an imperial-Ottoman, to a Turkish-Anatolian nation[87]. Russia did not have its own
Mustafa Kemal, nor its own Anatolism, therefore, as a result of the failure of demo-
cratic transformation, the neo-Soviet and neo-imperial ressentiment eventually tri-
umphed, within the context of which Russia is perceived as a continuation of the
USSR, and that, in turn, as a continuation of the Russian Empire, all of which osten-
sibly have been and continue to be opposed by numerous external and internal en-
emies, who have wanted to destroy them.

The national democratic revolutions of 2004 and 2014 in Ukraine (Maidan Revolu-
tions) against the post-Soviet ruling class associated with the Kremlin were perceived
particularly painfully by Vladimir Putin and his associates, because they challenged
both the neo-Soviet and traditional-imperial components of the hybrid Soviet-impe-
rial complex that was taking hold in Russia. As a result, from the rhetoric about the
struggle for a friendly or neutral Ukraine, Vladimir Putin and his associates moved on
to claim that the very creation of Ukraine and the recognition of a separate Ukrainian
people were a mistake. The same is claimed in regards to the other national repub-
lics too, but if their creation by the clearly non-Russian peoples of the former USSR
is perceived rather as a forced and irreversible evil[88], about Ukraine, in turn, they
reached to the conclusion that this "evil" can be and must be reversed with the aboli-
tion of Ukrainian statehood and national identity.

It is exactly for this reason why Vladimir Putin is not content with annexing
only the territories where ethnic Russians in the narrow sense (i.e., "Greate-Rus-
sians") constitute the majority, as was done with Crimea in 2014. In the full-scale war
launched on February 24, 2022 he sought to conquer and annex also those territories
that according to all the censuses in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union had
a clear ethnic Ukrainian majority. The problem is he considers Ukrainians as such
a fictitious nation.

While Putin calls himself "the biggest nationalist in Russia"[89], the Russian state
propaganda explains the war against Ukraine as a war against Ukrainian national-

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provinces that had existed before were abolished — i.e., Komi-Permyak, Taimyr, Evenk,
Koryak, Ust-Orda Buryat and Agin-Buryat Autonomous Okrugs), also named after their
respective peoples

[87] An Intellectual History of Turkish Nationalism: Between Turkish Ethnicity and Islamic
Identity, Umut Uzer, University of Utah Press, 2016

[88] In 2012, during his press conference, Vladimir Putin stated the following: "In the Russian
Empire there was no division into national-territorial formations, there were just gover-
norates. This applied both to the territories that are now part of the Russian Federation
and those that are not. For example, there was the Tiflis Governorate. And it functioned
well. *But is it possible to return to the past?*" ("Putin: The change in territorial division cannot
be associated with the solution of the national question", December 20, 2012, https://reg-
num.ru/news/polit/1606900.html)

[89] Vladimir Putin: "The biggest nationalist in Russia is me", October 24, 2014 during
a Q&A session at the Valdai Forum, https://youtu.be/v8UgW9lfZFQ

ists[90]. This might come accross (and often does) like ideological schizophrenia, however, this schizophrenia stems from the unreflected and ressentimental nature of Russian identity in Putin's Russia, which could develop neither into a Muscovite/Greate-Russian ethnic identity nor into a post-Soviet and post-imperial civic identity.

Instead of relying on one of these models or on their synthesis, the Russian ruling class and a significant part of society decided to return to the notion of "historical Russia" as the Russian Empire. Which has already failed twice — once in its explicit form in 1917, and the second time in its implicit reincarnation as USSR in 1991.

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90 In the official reports of the Russian Ministry of Defense, the Ukrainian military are called "nationalists". See an example of one of these messages on the official channel of the Russian Ministry of Defense dated February 13, 2023 https://t.me/mod_russia/24135. Search for the word "nationalists" on this channel returns over 600 such messages at the time of this writing https://t.me/mod_russia/

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