

Misinterpreting Nationalism

WHY *RUSKII* IS NOT A SIGN OF ETHNONATIONALISM

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Many observers of Russian political life have noted a shift in President Vladimir Putin's language toward greater "ethnonationalism." While this trend has been present for a few years, it became especially prominent after the start of the Ukraine conflict. In his March 2014 speech justifying the annexation of Crimea, Putin stated that Crimea was a *ruskii* (Russian) land, Sevastopol a *ruskii* city, and Kiev "the mother of *ruskie* cities." Conventionally, *ruskii* is interpreted as defining Russians linguistically and ethnically, while the adjective *rossiiskii* is used to refer to the Russian state and citizenship. A number of scholars have built on this observation to [argue](#) that Putin has [shifted](#) from statist to ethnic nationalist and that Russia's growing ethnicization endangers Russia's traditional multinational character.

This, however, is too narrow a view. The use of the term *ruskii* does not imply a growing ethnicization of Russian state identity. It may be the case that Russian society is developing a more acute sense of ethnic awareness (even if ethnic nationalism, as demonstrated by levels of xenophobia, ethnic tension, and ethnic crime, has been in decline since the beginning of the Ukraine conflict). Yet, the term *ruskii* does not encapsulate this evolution. Here I propose some alternative connotations to better capture the complexity of Russia's current political project: *ruskii* as a way to reinforce the historical unity of Eastern Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians)—and therefore hamper Ukraine from leaving Russia's nest—and *ruskii* as a way to assert Russia's messianic destiny.

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A History of Terminological Competition

Terms have their own history, and meanings evolve in time and space. Chronicles date the Christianization of Russia in Kiev to the baptism of Prince Vladimir in the tenth century. This state was referred to as *Kievskaia Rus'*. The term *Rus'* and its derivative adjective *ruskii* were used for centuries to refer to the state, culture, and language that was born from this principality. The competing term of *Ros* was used by Byzantines since the ninth century. It was present in Russia in the fifteenth century as *Rosia*, and in the eighteenth century as *Rossiia*. In the early nineteenth century, the two roots were used in parallel. Confusion was the norm; depending on the context, the subjects of the Russian state could be *rossiiskii*, *ruskii*, or *obshcheruskii*; ethnic Russians could be *rossiiskie*, *ruskie*, *velikorossiiskie*, or *velikorusskie*.

What is interesting is that after the term *ruskii* fell into partial disuse because of the rise of its *rossiiskii* competitor, it was revived in the second half of the nineteenth century in a specific geopolitical context. As French scholar Virginie Symaniec [demonstrates](#), the revival of the use of *ruskii* had distinct political objectives, i.e., the “reunification of Russian lands” after the period of Polish-Lithuanian domination. The root *Russ* sought to define what might also be called “Eastern Slavic,” a generic term that includes the three modern nations of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. This aim is visible in the terminological dissociation between the “Russification” (*rusifikatsiia*) of non-native populations of the empire (e.g., Siberian, Turkic, and Caucasian peoples), and the “re-Russification” (*obrusenie*) of the *ruskie* who had been Polish-Lithuanian for several centuries.

***Ruskii*: A Bridge to Ukraine, Not a Claim of Russia’s Mono-ethnicity**

I did not take this historical detour to claim that Vladimir Putin, who is more passionate about martial arts than historical works, is aware of the multiple convolutions of the terms *ruskii* and *rossiiskii*, or that he uses them with consciousness of their history. What this detour shows is that *ruskii* has two meanings. Today it defines all those who do not consider themselves to belong to a national minority group in Russia and identify as “ethnic” Russians, but it also designates the unity of Eastern Slavs, which is the much older meaning of the term.

I argue that Putin’s use of the term in his 2014 speeches concerns this second meaning: the revival of the imperial meaning of *ruskii*, in order to reconnect Eastern Slavs. Ukraine is part of this *ruskii* realm based on the legacy of the Kievan Rus’, which was lost to Poland and Lithuania for several centuries, then reintegrated into Russia, and is now in the process of being lost again.

This explains why Putin can both insist increasingly on *ruskii* while continuing to claim the principle of Russia’s multinational character. Contrary to what many observers

thought they noticed, his definition of *ruskii* is not the opposite of *rossiiskii*. On this, Putin differs from many Russian nationalist circles that want to promote *ruskii* as a response to what they see as the failure of *rossiiskii*. Their fear of Russia losing its own identity predominantly targets migrants from Central Asia and Russia's North Caucasians (Russia's Siberian peoples, Tatars, Bashkirs, and Finno-Ugric populations are not perceived as a threat). However, Putin is not an ethnonationalist and does not use *ruskii* in the same ideological way that ethnonationalists do.

Insisting on Kiev, Crimea, and Sevastopol as *ruskii* does not underline an ethnic nationalism that would discriminate against non-ethnic Russian citizens of Russia. Rather it is the continuation of an old historical theme, which stipulates that Eastern Slavs in their three modern national units come from the same cradle, Kievan Rus'. Historically speaking, Kiev is indeed a *ruskii* land, whereby *ruskii* is understood in the original sense of Eastern Slavs, not the modern Russian state. The notion of the "reunification of Russian lands" (*sobranie russkikh zemlei*) is thus not evidence of ethnic irredentism but a ghost from the imperial past. Putin's message is directly aimed at reviving this imperial *longue durée* in the hope that Ukraine will not leave Russia's sphere of influence and become "absorbed" into the European world.

Russian Messianism: *Ruskii* as Russia's Voice in the World

The "imperial" use of the term *ruskii* is also connected to another meaning, which again should not be understood as ethnocentric. *Ruskii* is the classic adjective used to describe all messianic ideological trends that developed in Russia, especially during the Silver Age (the vivid philosophical revival of the 1890s-1920s). In the works of Vladimir Soloviev and Nikolai Berdyaev, Russia's unique and distinct message to the world is formulated as a *ruskii*, not *rossiiskii*, one, even though neither of them can be considered an ethnonationalist. Nikolai Fedorov's variety of space theology, cosmism (*kosmizm*), is also termed *ruskii*. These are all rooted in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's conception of a fraternal unity of mankind where Russia serves as a pioneer, expressed under the notion of "Russian universality" (*ruskoe vsemirnoe*).

This traditional Russian messianism has been updated and absorbed under the more modern label of the "Russian World" (*ruskii mir*). Long before it became part of the Russian state narrative, the term was crafted by a team of intellectuals close to Gleb Pavlovsky's Russian Institute (*ruskii institut*) and its journal, *Ruskii zhurnal*, which inspired many subsequent online media projects and served as incubator for a large number of young publicists, thinkers, and journalists. The designers of the Russian World concept were all passionate about Russian philosophy and, at the same time, were specialists in marketing and branding. This merging of genres proved to be a potent mix. In the marketing sense, the Russian World is a brand for establishing Russia's voice in the chorus of nations, but it is also a vessel for a more philosophical or

religious messianism, whereby Russia's message to the world has a universal value of salvation.

Pavlovsky's Institute, its journal, and the Russian World concept all use the term *ruskii*, not *rossiiskii*. But these individuals too are far from being ethnonationalists who seek an ethnically pure, minority-free Russia. In their definition *ruskii* is not understood to have an ethnocentric character. The problem, for them, is that the term *rossiiskii* is overly reminiscent of the Yeltsin political project and its limits. A *rossiiskaia* Russia embodies a failed liberal ideology and leaves the diffuse impression of cloning Russia the way the West wanted it to be. In contrast, the Russian Institute's *ruskaia* Russia is a call both to participate in the globalized world and to offer a particular Russian voice.

Conclusion

Some of the key notions of Russian stateness are complex and require careful consideration of historical context and terminological use. The term *ruskii* is a multifaceted one. It can sometimes advance an ethnonationalist agenda, but it is not Kremlin authorities that use it in that sense. For them, *ruskii* is a reminder of the shared past of all those who descend from Kievan Rus'. Seen from the Kremlin's perspective, this shared past should determine a shared future: Putin regularly [states](#) that "Russians and Ukrainians are one people." The term *ruskii* therefore encapsulates not a drift toward ethnonationalism but difficulties in letting the imperial past go, in particular by accepting that Ukraine's "*ruskii*-ness" might not be embodied in a pro-Russia geopolitical position. The term also promotes Russia's messianic destiny: previously Christian or Communist, today the flagship of conservative values and the "Russian World." This revival of the imperial meaning of *ruskii* may be used in parallel with *rossiiskii* to define the state's multinational character. The semantic uses of *ruskii* and *rossiiskii* are not mutually exclusive but overlap and diverge depending on the context in which they are used.