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UNIFORMITY OR DIVERSITY?

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The Position of National Minorities in Putin's Russia:

Uniformity or Diversity?

Dr. Federica Prina

With the prominence of Putin as the 'face of Russia' on our television screens, and an internal and foreign policy characterised by a vigorous promotion of Russian patriotism and sovereignty, one may well forget the remarkable ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity of the Russian Federation.

Russia has a long tradition of multi-ethnicity. The vastness of the lands that comprised the Russian Empire and Soviet Union – reduced but still considerable in contemporary Russia – have resulted in an age-old intermingling of peoples. This diversity encompasses a multitude of Slavic, but also Finno-Ugric, Turkic and Asiatic peoples.¹ In the 2010 census as many as 193 groups and subgroups were listed, with nearly one fifth of the population identifying with groups other than the ethnic Russian majority.² Variations in ethnic background reflect a myriad of languages spoken across the territory of modern Russia, as well as high levels of religious diversity: four religions are considered traditional to Russia - Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism.³ While Russia's substantial Muslim population⁴ came to international attention during the Chechen wars, in most cases religious

¹ This include 46 indigenous peoples, the so-called 'indigenous people of the North, Siberia and Far East'.

² Census data can be found at:

http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm

³ The preamble of Law 'On Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations' (No. 125-FZ, 26 September 1997) refers to the four religions as 'an inalienable part of the historical heritage of the peoples of Russia'.

⁴ According to the Pew Forum, Muslims in Russia were projected to increase from approximately 16.4 million (2010) to 18.6 million (2030), and their share of the population from 11.7% (2010) to 14.4% (2030). See

minorities have lived peacefully alongside those who affiliate to the Russian Orthodox Church. In a region such as the Republic of Tatarstan – one of the territorial units of the Russian Federation – Russian Orthodox churches and monasteries sit alongside mosques.⁵

Such high levels of diversity, and a tradition of coexistence of disparate ethnic groups, does not mean the absence of Russo-centric approaches to Russia's history, with the rejection, by some, of Russia's pluri-ethnic character. For example, a 2013 Levada Center survey showed that 30% of ethnic Russians had feelings of dislike vis-à-vis persons from Russia's Southern republics residing in their cities; 25% felt anger and 6% fear.⁶ Ultra-right movements have engendered instances of hate crime: according to preliminary data by the Sova Centre, in the first half of 2015, 37 persons suffered injuries as a result of ethnically-motivated hate crime, and four of them died.⁷ A 2006 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism referred to instances of discrimination and harassment, affecting principally non-Slavic, darker-skinned groups, such as persons from Central Asia and the Caucasus.⁸ At the same time, the official (Putin's) position is one that ostentatiously supports a vision of a Russia that is multi-ethnic and multi-faith – yet existing practices promote homogenisation and uniformity across the various segments of Russian society.

ETHNIC MOBILISATION AFTER THE DEMISE OF THE SOVIET UNION

The question of how to deal with the ethnic mosaic of the former Russian Empire was one that had to be incorporated already into Soviet planning.⁹ The objective of peaceful inter-ethnic relations had

<http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-regional-europe/#russia>

⁵ Over half (53.2%) of the republic's population identified in the 2010 census as Tatars, who traditionally are affiliated to the Muslim faith.

⁶ See Levada Center, "Rossiyane o Migratsii i Mezhnatsional'noi Napryazhennosti" [Russians on Migrations and Inter-ethnic Tensions], 5 December 2013, at:

<http://www.levada.ru/05-11-2013/rossiyane-o-migratsii-i-mezhnatsionalnoi-napryazhennosti>

⁷ Sova Center for Information and Analysis, "Pro-Kremlin and Oppositional – with the Shield and on It: Xenophobia, Radical Nationalism and Efforts to Counteract them in Russia during the First Half of 2015", 31 August 2015, at: <http://www.sova-center.ru/en/xenophobia/reports-analyses/2015/08/d32675/>

⁸ Report by the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Doudou Diène, "Mission to the Russian Federation", A/HRC/4/19/Add.3, 20 May 2007.

⁹ See for example Lenin, V.I. "Critical Remarks on the National Question", in: *Lenin Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1972 [1913]), 17–51; Stalin, J. *Marksizm i Natsional'nyi Vopros [Maxism and the National Question]* (Moscow: State Political Literature Publishing, 1950 [1913]).

to be combined with the spreading of Communist ideas among the population, including groups with little or no knowledge of the Russian language. Thus, diversity was acknowledged as a fact, institutionalised and thus embedded in Soviet policies. One of the most significant steps in this direction was the subdivision of Soviet territory so as to 'assign' some regions to the largest ethnic groups, which became known as 'titular nationalities'. This form of ethnic federalism involved a hierarchy of territorial entities, starting with Union Republics (e.g. the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic), to autonomous republics,¹⁰ down to smaller units. These entities could easily be perceived as quasi-nation states by the titular groups - and indeed, newly-independent states (particularly the Baltic states) strove towards the nation-state model in the post-Soviet period.

If, with the end of the Soviet Union, former Union Republics became newly-independent states, there was also an upsurge of ethnic mobilisation *within* the former Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Territorial units declared their sovereignty *en masse* in the period 1990-1992, in what became known as the 'parade of sovereignties'.¹¹ Chechnya famously attempted secession, yet remained within the Russian Federation. Tatarstan negotiated a power-sharing treaty with Moscow,¹² and succeeded in preserving amicable relations with the federal centre. Ultimately a form of internal balance was reached, with a range of bilateral agreements between the federal authorities and the leaders of (ethnic and non-ethnic) regions. At the same time, ethnic mobilisation in the early post-Soviet period, and concerns over territorial claims (aggravated by the crisis in Chechnya), led to a generalised recognition of the 'excessive' focus on *territory* that had characterised ethnic federalism. In light of this, a Law on National *Cultural* Autonomy (NCA) was adopted in 1996,¹³ with the objective of providing persons belonging to nationalities other than the Russian majority with a degree of autonomy in the promotion of their cultures and languages, regardless of territorial formations. Such non-territorial arrangements would serve a *complementary* function to the existing ethnic federal structure, while diminishing the emphasis on territory. This would, it was hoped, contain territorial claims and inter-ethnic tensions more generally. In 2000 the Russian government noted, with reference to NCA: 'this practical form of self-determination and

¹⁰ Such as the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR).

¹¹ Hale, H.E. "The Parade of Sovereignty: Testing Theories of Secession in the Soviet Setting", *British Journal of Political Science*, 30(1) (2000), 31-56.

¹² Signed in 1994.

¹³ Law 'On National Cultural Autonomy', No. 74-FZ, 17 June 1996.

realization of the rights of national minorities is of special importance for those ethnoses that do not enjoy territorial autonomy in view of their geographical dispersion.’¹⁴

Ethnic republics¹⁵ remain regions in which titular nationalities enjoy particular privileges: republics can declare regional (titular) languages co-official with Russian, and their schools teach in, or through the medium of, these languages (albeit to varying degrees¹⁶). These measures suggest a general attention to diversity which precedes Putin and has, to some extent, continued under his leadership. At the same time, Putin has advanced a movement towards uniformity which encompasses *both* territorial and non-territorial arrangements for the management of ethnic diversity.

RECENTRALISATION UNDER PUTIN

The Putin leadership has strongly promoted a process of re-centralisation, by reducing the autonomy of the regions, including the ethnic republics. The regions had distanced themselves from the federal centre under Yeltsin, when the loosening of the centre-periphery connections had gone so far as to generate concerns over a possible disintegration of the Russian Federation.¹⁷ Putin’s reforms in this area have been wide-ranging, including: reconfirming the primacy of federal legislation and institutions over regional ones; and a shift towards appointment of leaders of regions and localities, thereby increasing federal controls. In particular, some measures have disproportionately affected national minorities. Among these has been the partial alteration of the federal structure of the Federation, by which some ethnicity-based regions have been merged with predominantly Russian regions.¹⁸ Another set of measures that has advanced homogenisation is linked to a Federation-wide

¹⁴ ACFC (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities), First Report submitted by the Russian Federation, ACFC/SR(1999)015, 8 March 2000, at 12.

¹⁵ These are generally referred to as ‘ethnic republics’, although the 1993 Russian Constitution calls them simply ‘republics’. In 2014 Russia had 83 ‘subjects’ (territorial units), including 21 ethnic republics. The number rose to 85 with Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

¹⁶ Depending on numbers of persons belonging to minorities, and the availability of resources.

¹⁷ Petrov, N., “Federalism”, in: M. McFaul, N. Petrov and A. Ryabov (eds.), *Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004), 213–238.

¹⁸ This process stalled in 2008 before it could expand to affect ethnic republics.

education reform, which has resulted in the overall decrease in the teaching of minority languages and cultures in the ethnic republics after a peak in the 1990s.¹⁹

What about arrangements to promote the rights of national minorities outside the framework of ethnic federalism? The School of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Glasgow has been researching the forms of implementation of NCA legislation in Russia.²⁰ Hundreds of national cultural autonomies (NCAs) have been established at the local, regional and federal levels since 1996; despite this, the NCA system has been repeatedly criticised for its overall ineffectiveness in creating the conditions for autonomous management of matters of relevance to minorities – including minority-language education and media – or in enabling NCAs to directly influence policies. Indeed, Russia's NCA system is removed from the original NCA concept, as developed in the late 19th century, which foresaw full autonomy in the management of institutions for the preservation of minority languages and cultures.²¹ Yet dismissing all NCAs as no more than 'pocket NGOs' would mean dismissing the commitment of many of these organisations' representatives to preserve their cultures and languages, in an environment characterised by a non-democratic tradition of centralised decision-making. Interviews with respondents from NCAs revealed that levels of motivation, and underlying reasons, for becoming involved with these institutions can greatly vary from case to case. These can include: an emotional attachment to one's ethno-linguistic and cultural heritage, and a desire to maintain this distinctiveness; a (more pragmatic) desire to achieve personal social (or political) status; and/or a drive to develop networks among state structures, optimising

¹⁹ I have written on this in: Prina, F. *National Minorities in Putin's Russia: Diversity and Assimilation* (London: Routledge, 2016) – see Chapter 6. See also Zamyatin, K., "From Language Revival to Language Removal? The Teaching of Titular Languages in the National Republics of Post-Soviet Russia", *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 11(2) (2012), 75–102.

²⁰ As well as other Central and East European countries that have adopted NCA legislation (Hungary, Serbia and Estonia). For Russia, interviews were held in June and October 2015 in Moscow, St Petersburg, Kazan, Saransk. This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/L007126/1], under the project 'National Minority Rights and Democratic Political Community: Practices of Non-Territorial Autonomy in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe' (2014-2017). I also draw from interviews conducted in 2010-11 in various cities of Russia (Moscow, St Petersburg, Petrozavodsk, Saransk, Kazan, Voronezh and Tver); representatives of NCAs constituted one of the categories of respondents.

²¹ Described by Karl Renner in his article *State and Nation*, published in 1899 (reprinted in E. Nimni, *National Cultural Autonomy and its Contemporary Critics*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2005). The concept is based on the 'personality principle', or the idea that communities may be autonomous and sovereign within a multinational state, regardless of whether they have, or identify with, a particular territory.

chances for funding and other types of support. In some cases one of these factors may prevail, and in others several may simultaneously play a role. Thus, persons belonging to minorities cultivate their networks and use shifting opportunities with different purposes and in different ways. What leaders of NCAs²² have in common is the need to operate within the ‘politics of the possible’²³ to reproduce pre-established narratives of inter-ethnic relations, and follow specific (uniform) ‘rules of engagement’ in their day-to-day work.

RUSSIA’S UNIFORMITY: HOW MINORITY ISSUES ARE KEPT OUTSIDE POLITICS

The state’s promotion of uniformity across Russian society means that deviation from state-endorsed socio-political narratives is strongly circumscribed. Attacks on non-uniformity are activated not only in case of expression of political dissent (treated as deviant political behaviour), but also in other instances, such as: socially ‘unaccepted’ types of diversity (for example, homosexuality as ‘non-traditional sexual relationships’²⁴); and certain *forms* of ‘accepted’ diversity (such as ethno-linguistic and religious diversity), which are, however, expressed in non-conventional ways. I first describe the promotion of uniformity, and then the way in which the expression of diversity is contained.

One of the means to advance uniformity in Russia is by situating minority issues outside political processes. Political parties on the basis of ethnicity are banned in Russia,²⁵ and considerations linked to minority rights do not constitute part of mainstream parties’ political platforms. This scenario markedly differs from political systems in which representatives of minorities have reserved seats in parliament, and/or guaranteed opportunities to actively participate in law- and policy-making. Meanwhile, regional leaders – including leaders of ethnic regions – have generally been absorbed

²² And generally other institutions representing minorities, such as cultural centres and NGOs.

²³ This point was noted by an academic in St Petersburg, who used the expression ‘politics of the possible’ during an interview held on 29 October 2015.

²⁴ Article 5(2)(4) of the federal Law ‘On Protecting Children from Information Harming their Health and Development’, No. 436-FP, 29 December 2010 (following amendments introduced by Law No. 135-FZ, 29 June 2013).

²⁵ As well as professional affiliation and religious identity. Article 9(3) of Law ‘On Political Parties’, No. 95-FZ, 11 July 2001.

into the ranks of the party of power, United Russia.²⁶ The resulting political uniformity largely excludes public debate on matters of relevance to minorities.

As minority issues are distanced from the political sphere, they are equated with 'cultural development' rather than cultural or political rights. The activities of minority institutions (NCAs and others) may be held in cooperation and/or with the financial support of the authorities,²⁷ yet they have to fit into government-endorsed programmes. Although some variations exist, relevant activities have included: the organisation of festivals, concerts, exhibitions and other cultural events; the holding of roundtable discussions on issues relating to ethnic diversity; the teaching of minority languages (through Sunday schools or in cooperation with state schools); and the publication of newspapers in minority languages. Russia's reports to the Council of Europe, on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities²⁸ list numerous festivals and roundtables,²⁹ as well as 'programmes of [inter-ethnic] tolerance'.³⁰ Multiple groups are brought together during such events, particularly through institutions such as Houses of Nationalities, which gather representatives of different ethnic groups at the level of various cities, and seek to demonstrate the high levels ethno-linguistic and cultural diversity in urban settings.³¹

The separation of the cultural and political spheres, and minorities' general exclusion from the latter, means that involvement in cultural activities is not matched by opportunities for participation in devising policies affecting minorities, such as minority-language education. Registering an NCA makes it plain that the institution in question will not challenge the socio-political status quo, and

²⁶ See Isaacs, R. and Whitmore, S. "The Limited Agency and Lifecycles of Personalized Dominant Parties in the Post-Soviet Space: The Cases of United Russia and Nur Otan" *Democratization* 21(4) (2014), 699–721. See also Prina, *op. cit.* (n. 19), at 111-113.

²⁷ Of the government funds made available for national minorities' cultural programmes, some are managed by the authorities themselves, while others are given to the minority organisations in the form of grants for the realisation of events and projects. Russia's Third Report to the ACFC cites 240 million roubles per year (approximately 5.7 million euro) for 'events for the realisation of the national policy'. ACFC, Third Report submitted by the Russian Federation, ACFC/SR/III(2010)005, 9 April 2010, at 82.

²⁸ Ratified by Russia in 1998.

²⁹ For example, see ACFC, Third Report submitted by the Russian Federation, *op. cit.* (n. 27), at 30-43.

³⁰ See, for example, "Program for inter-ethnic and inter-cultural relations, prevention of xenophobia and strengthening of tolerance in Saint-Petersburg for 2006-2010", cited in ACFC Third Report submitted by the Russian Federation, *op. cit.* (n. 27), at 84.

³¹ For example, Houses of Nationalities exist in Moscow, St Petersburg and Kazan.

that it will operate ‘outside politics’.³² The limited participation of minorities in decision-making on these matters is exacerbated by the fact that both law and policy on minority rights are largely declarative. Again, this is linked to the use of vague expressions such as ‘cultural development’ of Russia’s peoples, rather than crystallising specific rights of persons belonging to minorities, and the corresponding duties of government bodies in promoting minority rights.

“FOLKLORISATION” INSTEAD OF MINORITY RIGHTS

It is in this context that a report to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has spoken about the ‘folklorisation’ of minorities in Russia – or minorities’ linguistic and cultural rights being treated primarily as folklore.³³ Folklore and ethnography were already heavily promoted during the Soviet period, as depoliticised (and therefore innocuous) ways of celebrating the Soviet Union’s diversity. It shows an ongoing attempt to construct a form of diversity that is not destabilising, but benign and easily manageable.

Festivals and cultural programmes are certainly not wholly devoid of significance. Rather, many respondents³⁴ indicated their continuing relevance in the celebration of minorities’ cultural distinctiveness, including through traditional songs and performances, and particularly on the occasion of traditional national holidays (such as the Tatar *Sabantui*). Many persons belonging to minorities shared a familiarity with cultural/folkloristic events, having become habituated to expressing themselves through them. Yet a few representatives of minorities expressed frustration at the limited tangible impact of these activities on the preservation of their languages and cultures, in the context of – among other things – decreasing numbers of speakers of minority languages.³⁵ In a country with a ‘core’ dominant culture and language, surrounded by multiple, marginalised minority cultures, diversity can only be maintained through robust policies for its promotion.³⁶ The opposite paves the way for assimilation.

³² This expression was used by various respondents involved with NCAs and peoples’ congresses (another form of ‘non-territorial autonomy’), interviewed in Saransk, Kazan and Moscow, in June and October 2016.

³³ PACE, “Situation of Finno-Ugric and Samoyed Peoples”, Doc. 11087, 26 October 2006.

³⁴ See note 20.

³⁵ Among other things, this is linked to restrictions on the autonomy of regions in teaching the languages, cultures and history of minorities, through the federal reform of the education system referred to above.

³⁶ Such as well-planned and effective language policies promoting minority languages. See, for example, Grin, F. and Moring, T.. *Support for Minority Languages in Europe: Final Report* (European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages/European Centre for Minority Issues, 2002).

The narrative of minority-rights-as-cultural-development is linked to the strengthening of Russian patriotism, and the promotion of values aiming at enhancing the cohesiveness of the Russian state. Such values comprise: love of the motherland; family values; the assertion of Russia's sovereignty and its great power status vis-à-vis the West; and, more recently, Crimea being part of Russia. Love for the motherland, in particular, is linked to the need to defend Russia from its enemies; in this context the 70th anniversary of Russia's victory in the Second World War (known in Russia as the 'Great Patriotic War') was celebrated in 2015 with much fanfare and military parades, used to solicit patriotic pride. Most of the said values are placed in the context of religiosity, as 'spiritual values' promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church (for the Russian majority) and other (government-endorsed) religious institutions.³⁷

It is significant that textbooks for the course 'Foundations of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics', introduced in the 2000s, are saturated with these values and principles. Schools and parents can choose between six modules of the course, for different religions (Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism), as well as the general 'Foundations of the Cultures of World Religions', and the course's secular version ('Foundations of Secular Ethics').³⁸ Despite the differences in modules, the principles found in textbooks are the same and closely associated to Russian patriotism. Spiritual and civic values are then disseminated through the education system, and include a patriotic but also a militaristic rhetoric (through the emphasis on the need to defend the motherland).³⁹

HOW DIFFERENCES BECOME REDEFINED AS "EXTREMISM"

With the promotion of uniformity, restrictions are imposed on various manifestations of the expression of diversity. These restrictions are linked to the idea of a potential menace to stability caused by ethnic diversity. This is evident, for example, in a statement by M.N. Kuz'min,⁴⁰ that

³⁷ For example, the Central Muslim Spiritual Directorate, headed by the Chief Mufti of Russia.

³⁸ See Willems, J. "Foundations of Orthodox Culture' in Russia: Confessional or Non-confessional Religious Education?" *European Education*, 44(2) (2012), 23–43.

³⁹ Sperling, V. "Making the Public Patriotic: Militarism and Anti-Militarism in Russia", in: M. Laruelle (ed.), *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 218-271.

⁴⁰ Former Director of the Institute of Nationality Issues in Education of the Ministry of Education and Science.

‘[c]ompared to mono-ethnic countries, multi-ethnicity predestines a country to less stability, to the presence of additional areas of inner contradictions’.⁴¹

This menace is not exclusively seen to originate from direct inter-ethnic tensions or open political dissent, but also from particular expressions of difference regarded as deviation from accepted norms of inter-ethnic relations. The dominant, state-sponsored narrative is one that declares the peaceful coexistence of Russia’s ethno-linguistic groups, but contrasts this with the position of those who espouse extremist views – in a black-and-white discourse of ‘tolerance’ versus ‘extremism’. The tolerance-extremism divide leads to the practice of automatically linking ‘different’ (non-conventional) representatives of ethnic groups to extremism, rather than assessing whether they indeed represent a threat to public order. For example, when post-Soviet Tatarstan attempted to re-introduce the Latin alphabet for Tatar – the conversion to the Cyrillic having been imposed under Stalin – those who advocated the return of the Latin alphabet were accused of separatism and labelled a ‘threat to national security’.⁴² The Latin alphabet was treated as outside the existing narratives of diversity – and as such able to trigger disunity and political turmoil.

Thus, difference is routinely associated to instability, while uniformity and ‘sameness’ are linked to public order. The concept of ‘extremism’ used by the Russian leadership is elastic, and it can stretch to accommodate its discourses and objectives. These are linked to both Russia’s internal and foreign policy (the state’s core interests), but also attacks on government-sponsored values are impermissible: deriding or challenging them is treated as a lack of respect for such principles. In one case, a Tatar nationalist was found guilty of incitement for ethnic hatred (and separatism) for condemning Russia’s annexation of Crimea.⁴³ The members of the Pussy Riot protest group, who performed an anti-Putin song in a cathedral in Moscow in 2012, were charged of incitement of

⁴¹ Kuz’min, M.N. “K Voprosu o Razrabotke Kontseptsii Federal’noi Etnonatsional’noi Obrazovatel’noi Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii” [On Compiling a Concept of Federal Ethnonational Educational Policy of the Russian Federation], in: *Materials of the Conference ‘Realisation of the National Regional Component of History Education in the National Republics of the Volga and Ural Regions: Problems and Perspectives’, 26 October 2004* (Kazan: Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tatarstan, 2005), 14–24, at 16.

⁴² For example, in a report presented before the Russian parliament, cited in Saiganova, S. “Turki Royut pod Russiyu cherez Tatarstan” [Turks Get into Russia through Tatarstan], *Vremya i Den’gi*, 8 February 2001.

⁴³ See, for example, “Tatar Activist Get Three Years in Jail for Stance on Crimea”, *RFE/RL*, 15 September 2015, at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/tatarstan-crimea-activist-prison/27249218.html>

religious hatred.⁴⁴ Charges of incitement to ethnic hatred have also been brought against unusual suspects, such as: the director of Moscow's Library of Ukrainian Literature, for spreading 'anti-Russian propaganda';⁴⁵ and an (ethnic) Russian shop assistant, for sharing links to mainstream Ukrainian television programmes on the Ukrainian crisis through social networks.⁴⁶ Moreover, the Russian authorities have for years added to a list of banned extremist materials which are associated with subversion even when they do not seem to pose a threat to public order; according to data by Sova, in the first half of 2015 the list grew twice the 2014 rate.⁴⁷ Restrictions have further applied to artistic expression: non-conventional treatment of religious themes in art has been linked to 'incitement to religious hatred'.⁴⁸ A powerful symbol of Russia's 'great power status', and of its different ethnic groups uniting to fight Russia's enemies, remains the 'Great Patriotic War': as such, some measures have restricted historical debate that can demystify the perception of the Russian army, revealing its veterans as less than heroes.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ They were however not found guilty of incitement, but hooliganism, and sentenced to imprisonment for two years. Although they were ultimately amnestied, this was only three months before they served the full sentence.

⁴⁵ Natalia Sharina. See "Russia: Librarian Locked up. Ukrainian Library's Director Accused of 'Inciting Hatred'", *Human Rights Watch*, 30 October 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/el/node/282848>

⁴⁶ Yekaterina Vologzheninova. See, for example, A. Dolgov. "Russian Woman Says Charged With 'Inciting Ethnic Hatred' for Posts on Ukraine Crisis", *The Moscow Times*, 5 January 2015, at: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/russian-woman-says-charged-with-inciting-ethnic-hatred-for-posts-on-ukraine-crisis/514044.html>; The woman, who was an ethnic Russian but wrote some posts in Ukrainian - having learned the language - was investigated for membership of Ukrainian nationalist groups.

⁴⁷ The list grew by 305 items (from 2562 to 2867) in the first six months of 2015. Sova Center for Information and Analysis (see note 7).

⁴⁸ See, for example, "Russians Convicted and Fined over Forbidden Art Show", *BBC*, 6 March 2012, at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/10595903>; see also Jonson, L. *Art and Protest in Putin's Russia* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁴⁹ For example, a book that included information on the rape of German women by Soviet soldiers during the fall of Berlin in 1945 was banned from schools in Yekaterinburg region. See Walker, S. "Russian Region Bans British Historians' Books from Schools", *The Guardian*, 5 August 2015, at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/05/russian-region-bans-british-historians-books-from-schools#img-1>.

Russia might be in search of narratives and values that can promote a sense of stability (and normality) in politically-challenging times.⁵⁰ At the same time, these attitudes support the view that ‘raw’ difference, as unfiltered by homogenising government-supported narratives, can be harmful. Uniformising tendencies also lead to national minorities being conceived as having hardly any *internal* heterogeneity. In this context, the NCA system reveals an assumption of homogeneity within groups, whose messages and goals can be easily streamlined – from the local, to the regional, to the federal level. The NCA system admits no internal fractures, or dissenting elements located within the group. Meanwhile, the focus on folklore (referred to above) further contributes to the idea of internally homogeneous groups, by ascribing specific (often folkloristic) traits to them. The existing scenario can be described in the shape of two concentric circles: an ethnic group that is internally homogeneous (the inner circle), with its ‘diversity’ adjusting to a broader patriotic uniformity (the outer circle).

Those labelled as ‘extremists’ – in the case of both those who disrupt public order and those who simply express dissent or unconventional forms of diversity – are presented as a few aberrations, against which the state must protect its (overall tolerant) citizens. While the perpetrators of hate crime have been prosecuted,⁵¹ the state effectively closes its eyes on widespread racism and discrimination in Russian society.⁵² And, while the day-to-day manifestations of racism might be more ‘banal’ than the actions of ‘extremists’ – e.g. discrimination in housing and employment rather than episodes of hate crime – racist views are not the preserve of the few.⁵³ Discriminatory views and stereotypes often remain unchallenged, which raises the question as to whether ongoing strategies of diversity management are indeed conducive to societal cohesion, in the presence of racist attitudes (particularly vis-à-vis migrant workers), and chauvinism (especially with regard to the annexation of Crimea). The Crimean question, in particular, can easily create fractures within

⁵⁰ Laruelle, M. “Rethinking Russian Nationalism: Historical Continuity, Political Diversity, and Doctrinal Fragmentation”, in: M. Laruelle (ed.), *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 13-48, at 26.

⁵¹ Sova Center for Information and Analysis (see note 7).

⁵² Osipov, A. “Soviet Party of Nations or Western Non-Discrimination: Is there a Dilemma for Russia?” in: K. Cordell, T. Agarin and A. Osipov (eds.), *Institutional Legacies of Communism: Change and Continuities in Minority Protection* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013), 59–73, at 66-67; see also the introduction on this.

⁵³ See for example, Verkhovsky, A. “Future Prospects of Contemporary Russian Nationalism”, in: M. Laruelle (ed.), *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 89–103.

Russia's society, when some groups (such as the Ukrainians residing in Russia) are aligned with Russia's enemies.

Finally, in addition to celebrating minority cultures, festivals carry additional messages, on friendly inter-ethnic relations, patriotism, and forms of (controlled) collective memory such as the 'Great Patriotic War'. But not only: they attempt to solicit general support of the state and the ruling party: thus, for example, United Russia flags can often be seen at festivals. Some respondents referred to festivals that promoted (mainstream) political figures, by providing additional exposure of incumbents, who strategically took part in these events prior to local or regional elections. These practices might be accepted by some persons belonging to minorities as the 'price to pay' to benefit from cultural programmes, which would otherwise remain unavailable to them. Yet they can lead to the state appropriating narratives and activities around cultural diversity, prioritising its interests to those of minorities. Moreover, through festivals the state can showcase narratives of a multi-ethnic country without however introducing wide-ranging anti-discrimination policies protecting minorities, or proactively promoting cultural diversity and multilingualism.

Consequently, representatives of national minorities often fall into a uniformity trap – whether wholly or partially, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or reluctantly, for opportunistic reasons or ultimately to promote minority interests. Like other civil society groups, they reproduce existing discourses, in order to gain funding, networks, and other opportunities. Those who go against these rules of engagement can hit invisible boundaries: thus, forms of ethno-cultural expression that may transcend the expression of culture per se, crossing into the political sphere, are generally avoided as counterproductive. Activities that deviate from existing, tried-and-tested blueprints – even when exclusively in the area of culture or education – can be denied support by the authorities.⁵⁴ Although the responses of the authorities partially varied depending on locality (and individual public officials), Russia's programmes of tolerance seem to display an intolerance to difference.

CONCLUSION

Russia continues to have considerable ethno-linguistic, cultural and religious diversity, with some persons belonging to national minorities striving to preserve their cultural distinctiveness. At the

⁵⁴ This was noted by some respondents who had sought to propose new activities, such as scholarships for young members of ethnic communities, exchange programmes, and supports for museums. The respondents stressed the authorities' predilection for multi-ethnic festivals.

same time, Russian society is becoming more culturally and linguistically homogenised, as well as politically uniform. The means available to national minorities to assert themselves and promote their rights remain outside political processes, while the expression of peaceful dissent – whether political or otherwise – is generally curbed by state organs. This leads to a culture-dominated minority discourse, with institutions such as NCAs primarily acting as cultural centres devoid of political voice.

Effectively the Russian government under Putin is attempting to cement separate social segments (cutting alongside ethnicity, religion and geography) through a form of homogenising patriotism. Intolerance to difference (including certain *types* of expression of what is, overall, ‘accepted’ difference) is detectable even in the presence of so-called ‘programmes of tolerance’ so frequently promoted by the Russian state. Meanwhile, minorities act within the realm of ‘the possible’, by adjusting to dominant narratives of (restricted) diversity. Groups are perceived as internally uniform and essentialised; they, in turn, fit into the broader patriotic view of Russia and adjust to centrally-conceived narratives and policies – themselves fused with religious or quasi-religious narratives. If Russia is moving towards increased uniformity with regard to its ethnicity-based territorial formations, this is even more so with regard to non-territorial arrangements for diversity management, whose legislation and policies remain generally declarative. National cultural autonomy could contribute to counteracting such homogenising dynamics, *if* the relevant institutions were indeed guaranteed greater autonomy in managing matters relating to the preservation of their languages and cultures.

While overarching civic values are essential for state cohesiveness, an excessive focus on uniformity can advance cultural absorption, and ultimately assimilation. Paradoxically, what outwardly looks like the expression of diversity becomes the promotion of uniformity – both in the sense of *cultural* uniformity, and in the impelling need to adjust to particular modalities of state-minorities interaction.

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