Introduction: What Is Russian Nationalism?

Nationalism is a relatively new concept. In Europe, it originated in the aftermath of the philosophical project of the Enlightenment. Historically, it has taken many forms – ethnic, religious, territorial, cultural, linguistic, affective, and banal – all of which have a substantial literature. It contributed to nation-building processes based on remapping territories, colonialism, totalitarianism, and regionalism. In its more recent forms, it has been redefined as a civic project rooted in the ground of multiculturalism or conceptualized as an 'imagined political community' (Anderson, 1991:6). At the time of writing, nations increasingly respond to environmental, political, global, and military crises by turning to discourses and practices of nationalism. Leaders appeal directly to the populist and tribal instincts of their peoples. In opposition to individual freedoms and human rights, this nationalism is exclusively and explicitly about borders – physical and otherwise. It appeals 'to the rich and the powerful', but also to citizens threatened by the disappearing homogeneity of the collective 'we' (Bull, 2018:8). Redefining nationalism and highlighting its dangers have become vital to political performance and activism and thus constitute conceptual focal points of this Element.

Russia presents a compelling case study for the examination of contemporary nationalism(s) because in Russia, nationalism has long been tightly connected with the nation-building process. In Russia, the nation-building dates to the reforms of Peter the Great (1672–1725) and has evolved through the age of industrialization and the social upheavals of the twentieth century. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the country has experienced a series of radical changes. After a period of so-called liberalization, it witnessed the return of state-controlled economic and cultural policies under Vladimir Putin, who has served continually as president or prime minister since 2000. The 2020 Russian constitution formalizes these shifts. It recognizes ethnic Russians as the nation-forming people and Russian as the country's official language. It solidifies Putin's search for a 'unified national idea', which he began in the early 2000s. This idea emphasizes Orthodox Christianity, heterosexual marriage (so-called traditional values), strong borders, patriotism, loyalty, and a Russia-centric representation of history. These values constitute a foundation of the nation-building processes in Putin's Russia, which has been based on the slowly evolving mechanisms of oppression and censorship, or what Lev Gudkov calls Russia's '*vozvratniy ili vtorichniy*'/'recurring or secondary' totalitarianism (Gudkov, 2018:255–7). In this Element, I use the terms 'nationalism in Russia' and 'Russian nationalism' interchangeably.

When Russia began its unlawful invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many Russian citizens took to the streets to protest the actions of their government.

The regime responded immediately by shutting down independent media and artistic expression and by arresting individuals. On 4 March 2022, the Federal Assembly passed a series of amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, seeking administrative and criminal responsibility for the dissemination of misinformation (called 'fakes' in Russian) about the Russian Armed Forces (The State Duma, 2022a). Substantial fines, criminal charges, and imprisonment for up to ten years were listed as potential punishments.

This Element reflects this moment of catastrophe and documents the performative practices of nationalism and resistances to it that have been building in Putin's Russia. The war in Ukraine has only intensified what has been developing in the country in the past two decades. Contemporary Russia is hostage to propaganda, partisan interpretations of its own history, and general political passivity. While acknowledging the devastating impact of Russia's war on Ukraine and its people, my focus is on the terrible outcomes of the invasion on the home front, with Putin's government turning its war machine against its own people.

The work of theatre artists chosen for this Element supports the following argument: as it has been censored, prohibited, and eventually closed, with its creators silenced, put under arrest, or forced into exile, this work exemplifies the dire state of political theatre in Russia. What was somewhat possible during the past two decades has come to an end today, yet the sheer existence of the art as protest provides hope and what Russians call 'a breath of fresh air' under dictatorship, and thus can be studied as an act of resistance to the homogenizing narratives and performances of nationalism.

Structure

Theatre and performance occupy a special place in the hierarchy of devices used by the state to advance its nationalist agenda and also by artists to resist it. State-endorsed performances of nationalism include the justice and penal systems, but also state-sponsored media and televised events, mass commemorations and celebrations, military and sports parades, pop music concerts, and other cultural events. These examples constitute a necessary point of departure, a kind of artistic and ideological reference point, to identify the emotional and affectual anchors of Russian nationalism. Section 1 analyses these instances of the performance of nationalism, including Putin's personal televised theatrics. Silencing through censorship, loss of employment, public ostracism, political and physical persecution, imprisonment, and exile are among the potential outcomes that await artists who decide to question the country's nationalist agenda or to tackle difficult sociopolitical issues in artistic language not

fully endorsed by the regime. In Section 2, I begin to study how Russian theatre artists subvert the authoritarian discourses of nationalism. The aim is to unpack the uneasy interdependence between state and artist to demonstrate that when theatre-making depends on state funding, artists, specifically politically mindful ones, are often forced to compromise between personal aspirations and state expectations. I use the widely known case of Kirill Serebrennikov, the former artistic director of the Gogol Centre in Moscow, who was put on trial on allegations of financial fraud, to exemplify this difficult artist versus state interdependency. In Section 3, I use Olga Malinova's work on symbolic politics, 'Politika pamyati kak oblast' simvolicheskoy politiki' (Malinova, 2018), to explore Anastasia Patlay and Nana Grinstein's documentary theatre, which brings historical documents and figures on stage. Their 2022 project *Memoria*, which interweaves three historical narratives of oppression as mobilized by the authoritarian state, demonstrates that by contrasting newly discovered accounts of the past with the glorified narratives of official history, documentary theatre can resist the homogenizing narratives of nationalism. Section 4 examines the figure of the other and the binary of exclusion and inclusion, which forms the basis of nationalism. It uses and applies methodologies of 'decolonial aestheSis' (Tlostanova, 2019) as strategies of resistance to nationalism's performative discourses and practices. My focus here is on the work of post-Soviet racialized artists, who use theatre to stage multiple cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious belongings. I begin with Nuria Fatykhova's project *Avazlar/Voices* (2020–1) produced by Theatre Platform MOÑ (Kazan), which aims to resurrect the Tatar language through participatory performance, and in so doing contests the colonizing narratives and practices of Russian nationalism.

With the war raging in Ukraine, which further solidified nation-building sentiment there, calls for decolonization, both in practice and as a scholarly framework to better understand Russia's imperial history, have gained momentum.[1] In this Element, I follow Alexander Etkind's injunction to read Russia's colonial practices as a 'dialectic in standstill' (Etkind, 2011:2). Historically, Russia expanded its military, economic, and cultural influence by annexing neighbouring countries to its west, such as Poland through its several partitions, and, at the same time, by developing its previously colonized eastern territories: what Etkind calls self- or internal colonization (2). Thus, 'Russia has

[1] Among recent publications on this topic see *Canadian Slavonic Papers* (65:2; 2023) and the 2023 annual convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies, fully dedicated to the theme 'Decolonization' (www.aseees.org/convention/2023-aseees-convention-theme).

been both the subject and the object of colonization and its corollaries, such as orientalism' (2). Studying resistance to this type of colonization, as Mladina Tlostanova notes, requires 'destabilizing the usual subject-object relationship from a specific position of those who have been denied subjectivity and rationality and regarded as mere tokens of their culture, religion, sexuality, race, and gender' (Tlostanova, 2015:40). Its key strategy, to which Fatykhova's work is dedicated, is creating 'epistemic subjects and looking at the world from the position of our own origins, lived experiences, and education' (40).

In my second example, I spotlight the nexus of migration and nationalism. Migration – internal and external – has presented a particular challenge for the development of post-Soviet Russia. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia's borders opening to the outside world, emigration caused a serious outflow of intellectual and creative power from the country. On the other hand, internal migration – mostly from central to eastern and northern regions of the country and from rural to urban areas – posed ethnocultural, social, and demographic challenges, which precipitated changes in government policy. The Kazakh-Russian writer Olzhas Zhanaidarov brings historical and contemporary Kazakh characters, often migrants from Kazakhstan to Russia, to the Russian stage. In his plays *Dzhut* (2013), which is dedicated to the memory of the famine in 1930s Soviet Kazakhstan, and *Magazin/Store* (2015), which describes the slave-like existence of female Kazakh migrant workers in Moscow, Zhanaidarov not only questions myths of equality and diversity as mobilized by Putin's propaganda, but also invites a racialized migrant – the proverbial *stranger-danger* (Ahmed, 2000:24) – into the theatrical spotlight, and so demonstrates that in today's Russia, oppressive cultural and legislative structures work to reproduce the repressive social, familial, and gender practices of migrants.

In my Conclusion, I revisit the notion of nationalism as a powerful but dangerous sociopolitical construct that can be promoted or resisted through the arts. My closing example is the so-called second theatre trial – the first being the case of Serebrennikov – which began on 4 May 2023, when the theatre director Zhenya (Evgeniya) Berkovich and the playwright Svetlana Petriichuk were arrested on suspicion of supporting terrorism in their award-winning 2020 production, *Finist Yasniy Sokol*/*Finist the Brave Falcon*. The case is ongoing, with the trial set for January 2024. This is the first criminal case in Russia in which an artistic work has triggered political persecution and criminal charges. It signifies the increasingly punitive character of Russian censorship. It is also no coincidence that a play about the abuse of women has been targeted. Preservation of the patriarchy and its values is a key nation-building strategy, as evidenced by the Presidential Decree N 809, *On Approval of the*

Fundamentals of State Policy to Preserve and Strengthen Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values (The State Duma, 2022c). Effectively, this case targets not simply two female artists but their feminist position.

Nationalism and the Russian Context

Whether as a theoretical concept, historical phenomenon, or political and legislative practice, nationalism is multifaceted and difficult to define. It can be understood as a type of ideology, but also 'as a social movement and symbolic language', and as a cultural practice that has multiple 'meanings, varieties and sources' (Smith, 2001:1). Inevitably, studying nationalism 'entails a consideration of related concepts, such as the nation, national identity and the national state' (1). In an 1882 lecture, the French orientalist Ernest Renan formulated basic principles of the idea of nation as a man-made construct, but also as 'a spiritual principle, the outcome of the profound complications of history', and 'a spiritual family' of independent subjects, 'not a group determined by the shape of the earth' (Renan, 1990:18–19). Resting on principles of simultaneity, the nation is a living organism that thinks of itself in several temporal dimensions: the past, with its glorious, traumatic, embarrassing, and hopeful legacies; the present, defined by peoples' desire or resistance to living together; and a set of collective aspirations for the future. For Renan, a nation has no right of possession of people or territories. Free individuals come together as a group to produce a 'kind of moral conscience which we call a nation' (20). Not everyone agrees with this analysis.

More recently, Ronald Suny has defined the nation as a 'group of people that imagines itself to be a political community that is distinct from the rest of humankind, believes that it shares characteristics, perhaps origins, values, historical experiences, language, territory' (Suny, 2001:28). Crucially, based on its shared culture, this nation 'deserves self-determination' and consequently lays claim to 'territory (the "homeland") and a state' (28). Moreover, Suny observes, nations are 'the result of the hard constitutive intellectual and political work of elites and masses' (28). This work mobilizes the nation's understanding of its collective history, rooted in the individual stories of its citizens. Since the late eighteenth century, European nations have sought more concrete forms of self-identification. In many cases, 'the state merged with the "nation" to claim its new status as a nation-state' (28). This process of self-identification involved 'ethnicised communities' seeking recognition as 'cultural communit[ies] of shared language, religion, and/or other characteristics with a durable, antique past, shared kinship, common origins, and narratives of progress through time' (28).

The theatre scholar Nadine Holdsworth echoes some of these ideas. For Holdsworth, the nation is 'one of the most powerful markers of identity and

belonging' upon which rests four foundational principles (Holdsworth, 2010:9). The first is the idea of the nation as a territorial community marked by clear borders. Secondly, language identifies the nation as a regulated community, although the official language(s) of the state can be different to that of the family. Heredity and ethnic belonging constitute the third principle. Most relevant to my aims in this Element is the fourth principle, the nation as defined by cultural output. This includes, for instance, the invention of national literature, drama, and theatre, both as constituent elements in education and culture, and also as ideological platforms. Systems of state governance, cultural institutions, and individual artists participate in making and dismantling images of the nation. They mobilize ideological and affectual mechanisms in performing nationalism.

For the political historian Eric Hobsbawm, nationalism is an emotional phenomenon, often manifesting as patriotism, as the expression of peoples' loyalty to the place of belonging and their willingness to 'identify themselves emotionally with "their" nation and to be politically mobilised as Czechs, Germans, Italians' (Hobsbawm, 1989:143). The desire to belong can be 'politically exploited', however, and nationalism can be mobilized for progress or for tyranny and colonization (143). Because of its constructed nature, nationalism and its ideologies, assumptions, and sentiments can be easily manipulated. Benedict Anderson famously described the nation as 'an imagined political community' (Anderson, 1991:6). For him, 'nation-ness' is 'a cultural artifact of a particular kind', which claims a special 'emotional legacy' on its members even if those members 'will never know most of their fellow-members' (4). In Anderson's view, the nation is defined by its semiotic and affectual systems of belonging because it is in the minds of its members that 'the image of their communion' lives (6). Anderson's notion of the nation as an imagined community 'extends Renan's appeal to collectivity and an interconnected national moral conscience' (20). 'Conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship', this trope connects the experiences of the individuals to those of the group (7).

The recent resurgence of nationalist aspirations in Europe is typically led by conservatives and is accompanied by aggression against individual freedoms and human rights, nostalgia for the colonial project, and fear of the (racialized) other. Characterized by authoritarian systems of government, which capitalize on village psychology, today's nationalisms mobilize the rhetoric of populism, and in so doing expose the dangers of nationalist rhetoric (Sennett, 2011:49).

In Russia, nationalism has long been tightly connected to the nation-building process, which historians identify either as 'the question of nation' or a state (Suny, 2001:35). Its practices and narratives evolved through expansion of territories and colonization of both the neighbouring peoples and the ethnic

groups settled within Russian borders. From 988, when Orthodox Christianity was adopted as the state religion, the Church played a special role in defining Russia as a nation by fusing 'the notions of Orthodoxy and Russianness' (35). At the time, conversion to Orthodox Christianity allowed individuals to fully 'assimilate into the Russian community' (36). For centuries, however, and depending on the region, integration of the colonized people varied: often, 'peasant or nomadic populations . . . retained their tribal, ethnic, and religious identities. Some elites, like the Tatar and Ukrainian nobles, dissolved into the Russian *dvoriantsvo* (nobility), but others, like the German barons of the Baltic or the Swedish aristocrats of Finland, retained privileges and separate identities' (41). From the mid-nineteenth century till the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, there were two complementary practices of assimilation into the empire for non-ethnic Russians – 'Russification' and 'Russianization'. The first one presupposed 'a surrender of ethnic identity through forced assimilation'; the second 'mean[t] the increased hegemony of Russian language, culture, and institutions' (Pearson, 1989:89). By implementing these practices, the authorities bolstered 'the empire's polyethnic borderlands' and 'ensure[d] the political loyalty and social stability' of non-dominant national groups (Staliūnas, 2007:7). As a result, ethnic minorities were gradually losing their territories, religious and cultural identities, and languages while ethnic Russians grew stronger as the leading group of the empire (Pearson, 1989:94). By the early twentieth century, ethnic groups' resistance to losing their privileges had significantly grown. To a certain degree, it was the unrest of the minorities that instigated the 1905 Russian Revolution. To prevent this revolution from spreading across the empire, Nicolas II made compromises to the Russification policy. The freedoms did not last for too long: the new administration, headed by Peter Stolypin, 'returned to Russification with a heightened sense of urgency and renewed vigor' (99). By the time the Bolsheviks came to power, the empire had successfully reimplemented its nationality policy, and so it prepared a fruitful soil for the ethnic groups' further assimilation and acculturation to take place during the Soviet period. After the Bolsheviks turned the Russian empire into the Soviet empire, many pre-1917 patterns of nation-building made a comeback. In the 1930s, Stalin personally supported the rebirth of Russian nationalism. He 'took a keen interest in research on Slavic antiquity and hoped that such research would help the Soviet regime demonstrate the primeval communism of Russians' (Laruelle, 2019:75). Communism was a convenient doctrine for Soviet nationalists and under their influence it functioned as a new religion in uniting the peoples of the USSR. Moreover, as Marlene Laruelle notes, from 'the mid-1960s, some state and party organs . . . undertook a discreet attempt to fuse Soviet ideology and Russian nationalism, progressively rehabilitating both

Orthodoxy and neo-paganism' (75). The myth of internationalism, the equality of all workers living in and beyond the USSR, was another strong trope of Soviet nationalism. The slogan 'Friendship of the Peoples' reflected the unity of Soviet citizens with each other and against external enemies. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Mikhail Gorbachev's top-down reforms and democratization of the Soviet systems of political, cultural, and economic control made the collapse of the Soviet empire inevitable. As Suny observes, the 'implosion of the center allowed the subordinate peripheries' to seek their independence (Suny, 2001:33). Many former Soviet republics, from Ukraine to Georgia, and autonomic regions within Russia itself, like Tatarstan or Bashkiria, embarked on the road of national self-determination and decoloniality.

In the summer of 1996, after his re-election as Russia's president, Boris Yeltsin called on his compatriots to come up with a new national idea, something 'to rival the American Dream' and to help people 'erase all memories of Glory to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union' (Rubin, 1996). This call was issued through the government-supported *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, which offered a prize of $2,000 for the best entry. Suggestions ranged from reviving the Russian spirit with the help of the Russian Orthodox Church to asking each Russian citizen to 'take personal responsibility for the country's future' (Rubin, 1996). However, in the country that had just freed itself from the seventy-year grip of one ideology, there was no appetite for embracing another, and Yeltsin's admittedly ludicrous experiment failed. At the same time, nationalism experienced a surge in the USSR's former republics, which were now actively seeking territorial, political, cultural, and economic independence. 'Baltic nationalisms', as Laruelle observes, 'and, to a lesser extent, their Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Georgian counterparts were praised for contributing to the democratization of their republics and their engagement with the West, while their ethnocentric "excesses" were excused as corollaries to a necessary phase of national political construction' (Laruelle, 2019:3). In response, Yeltsin opted for a pluralist concept 'Rossiyane'/ 'Russian citizens' as 'Moscow's answer to the nationalism of the ethnic republics' (3).

With Putin coming to power, Russian nation-building returned. It capitalized on people's nostalgia for the Soviet past and on Putin's personal conviction that the collapse of the USSR was one of the major historical catastrophes of the twentieth century. Putin's position sharply contrasted with Yeltsin's, which was to represent the end of the USSR as consistent with historical trends and hence 'progressive, even if difficult' (Malinova, 2018:95). The difference was obvious from the start. In his presidential address to the Federal Assembly in July 2000, a newly elected President Putin called for 'a resurrection of patriotism and historical memory as a means to reinforce national unity' (Wood, 2011:177).

Revising the nation's history via the figure of the Father of the Nation standing above his people in the performative posture of the saviour of the Motherland was to be Putin's strategy. 'Putin and his handlers have structured his rule from the outset as a performance' and have aspired to create an image of power and protection which aligns Putin personally 'with the fate of the country' (173). This protector narrative – legitimized in the 2020 constitutional reforms – was based on such traditional Russian values as the hetero-normal family, patriarchy, and Orthodox Christianity. It promised to observe and defend Russia's strong borders and its military power, and to recognize ethnic Russians as a nation-forming group. In addition, the protector narrative placed Putin at the centre of this myth-making process, which reinforced connections between the country's past, present, and future. For example, the Kremlin ideologists purposefully deployed World War II – 'an event of mythic proportions that underlines the unity and coherence of the nation, gives it legitimacy and status as a world power' – in their propaganda (174). Constructed during the Soviet time and revived in Putin's ideological program, the myth of the Great Patriotic War – 'simultaneously timeless and rooted in time, that involves suffering and redemption, trauma and recovery from the trauma' – was mobilized by the Kremlin propagandists to better define Russia's identity, rationale, and purpose (174). This manipulation of history in combination with the creation of new political myths, convenient for the regime and its oppressive policies, constitutes what Olga Malinova calls a 'politics of cultural memory', which, unlike professional historiography, operates with 'simplified narratives that reduce complex and contradictory historical processes to convenient and emotionally coloured schemes' (Malinova, 2018:37). Today's idealogues of Russian nationalism continue to build on these narratives and myths. They present Russian history – from the Battle of the Neva (1240) to Napoleon's invasion (1812) and now the war in Ukraine – as cyclical, always in confrontation with the collective West, continually fighting its enemies for political, cultural, and economic independence. In this model, Russia does not lose, so it must mobilize all its structures and institutions, including the church, as means to guarantee imminent success.

According to Laruelle, there are four trends of Russian nationalism as it developed under Putin's regime: Imperial nationalism, Eastern Slavic nationalism, Ethnic Russian nationalism, and '*Rossiiskii* nationalism', which presupposes 'a visa regime with Central Asia and the Caucasus and a specific status for ethnic Russians inside Russia, but with no support for Russian irredentism in the "near abroad"' (Laruelle, 2019:7). To reinforce these trends, Putin's propaganda machine utilizes the emotional energies of his supporters, which include his own administration and multiple conservative forces. Although Putin's

presidential office cultivates an image of a pluralist ideological apparatus from which the state's philosophical doctrine stems, his most loyal and powerful group of supporters is comprised of the ambitious state apparatchiks, who are the successors of the last generation of the Soviet managerial elite, and who dream of using their access to power to change Russia. They support Putin's nationalist project because it is so firmly rooted in 'coercion and violence as methods of governance and ways of self-preservation' (Pastukhov, 2022). The second influential group of Putin's supporters consists of a powerful political, ideological, and spiritual conglomerate of individuals interconnected by ideas of national Bolshevism, conservative patriotism, and fascism. This group includes Russian Eurasians like Alexander Dugin, Russian Fascists – followers of Ivan Ilyin's philosophical teachings – and Communists, among others. Because they do not hold influential administrative positions, for this group, violence is an end in itself and it has no limitations. For the Kremlin apparatchiks, however, violence, even war, is only an instrument for retaining power (Pastukhov, 2022). Putin serves as connecting tissue between the rationalism of Kremlin's apparatchiks and the irrationalism of the other group.

The conceptual construct of the 'Russian World' is the cornerstone to these ideologies. It is based on philosophies and practices of (self)-isolationism and colonization which seek to impose a special way of being on the Russian diaspora worldwide and the country's closest neighbours. Formulated by Petr Shchedrovitsky in the article 'Russkiy mir i transnatsional'noe russkoe' (2000), the Russian World mobilizes a form of ethnic nationalism rooted in the supremacy of the Russian language. To Shchedrovitsky, 'those who speak Russian in their everyday life – also *think* Russian, and as a result – *act* Russian' (Kudors, 2010:3). They deserve protection both within the borders of Russia itself and worldwide. Since Putin's coming to power, this ambiguous ideological concept has been institutionalized and promoted. In 2007, Putin signed a decree to establish the Russian World Foundation. Supported through state funds and designed on similar principles to the British Council or the Goethe Institute, this foundation was intended to work in tandem with the Russian Orthodox Church to promote the Russian language and Russian culture worldwide, so to make the Russian World the keystone of the country's global influence and soft power (3). Metropolitan Kirill, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, supported the Russian World idea. In 2006, he declared that 'a unique Russian civilization, consisting of Russia and the Russian World, should oppose Western civilization in its assertion of the universality of the Western tradition' (3). Such rhetoric prepared the ideological ground for the annexation of Ukrainian territories and the 2022 war.