

‘Is it really diversity when you can’t study your native language in school?’: Negotiating the discourse of a multi-ethnic Russian people from below

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Abstract

This article explores bottom-up responses to the Kremlin’s approach to nation-building in a multi-ethnic state. How do residents of ethnically mixed cities navigate conflicting themes of unity and diversity in federal discourse of Russia as a multi-ethnic people? This discourse runs counter to assimilative policies and a concurrent vision of Russia as a civilization rooted in Slavic culture. In the diverse city of Kazan, the discourse is shown to be an accessible resource for constructing belonging, but a problematic basis for nation-building. The discussion highlights the importance of regional and ethnic subject positions in bottom-up engagement with nation-building in Russia.

Key words

Diversity; nation-building; everyday nationhood, multi-ethnic states; Russia

Introduction

Official discourse of the Russian nation under Putin has been widely debated in recent years, with particular attention given to its plural nature and strategic shifts in repertoire (Laruelle 2019; Blakkisrud 2022). Efforts to understand the dynamics of Russian national discourses at sub-federal levels have been more limited, with notable exceptions in bottom-up research on memory (Blackburn 2018), and patriotism (Goode 2018), and in isolated studies of regional and ethnic specificities (Rutland 2015; Stewart 2021). There is growing recognition of the need to attend to the plurality of voices of Russian nationalism, which includes regional variation as well as overlooked differences among non-elite actors (Laruelle 2019, p. 8). As analysts seek to understand the effects of the intensified nationalist rhetoric accompanying the war in Ukraine in the Russian public sphere, this topic has gained new relevance (Yusupova 2022a).

This article aims to contribute a perspective on nation-building in Russia that highlights how regional and ethnic dimensions of Russia's heterogeneity can shape perceptions of the Russian nation and engagement with political discourse. In particular, it examines engagement with the discourse of a multi-ethnic people, one of the key concepts used by the Kremlin to construct Russian national identity in the post-Soviet period. By official accounts, the harmonious coexistence of dozens of ethnic groups, preserving their cultural, religious and linguistic differences over centuries while united in patriotic devotion, is a unique and defining feature of Russia (Putin 2019). Simultaneously, federal narratives describe the Russian nation as an ethnic community and a 'civilization', a union of peoples led by Russians, thus subordinating non-Russian cultures (Hale & Laruelle 2020). Furthermore, the actions of the state since Putin first assumed power have systematically undermined, rather than supported Russia's diversity. Cumulative centralizing reforms have eroded the autonomy of ethnic republics, and eliminated measures protecting non-Russian languages and cultures from assimilation. Minority resistance to these reforms has been framed as unpatriotic and serving foreign interests as homogenization has been justified as necessary for stability (Prina 2021). Far from being in robust condition, Russia's diversity has been vulnerable for some time (Prina 2011). Given the state's contradictory approach to ethnicity, how do ordinary residents of ethnically mixed cities in Russia engage with the discourse of Russians as a multi-ethnic people?

This article considers the illustrative case of Kazan, the capital of Russia's Republic of Tatarstan, where diversity has taken on symbolic significance in narratives of place and people at multiple scales. The city is home to an almost equal proportion of Tatars and Russians, together forming 96% of residents, with the remainder comprising other ethnic groups. At the federal and republic levels, Kazan is promoted as an exemplary case of Russia's inter-

ethnic and religious harmony (Graney 2007). Yet, in recent years, tensions in ethnic politics have spilled into view. A 2018 amendment to the Russian education law abolished the compulsory teaching of republics' titular languages, escalating conflict over linguistic rights (Arutyunova & Zamyatin 2021). Cultural organisations in the city construct narratives about Russia's diversity with plural local viewpoints in mind (Wilmers 2022b). Conducted in Autumn 2017 and Spring 2018, the interviews capture perspectives from a location in which questions of Russia's diversity had become particularly salient.

Below, I first consider the literature concerning the challenge posed by ethnic diversity to nation-building, and argue for a bottom-up approach that combines the perspective of everyday nation-building with social psychological theory of ideological dilemmas. I next address the tension between unity and diversity in post-Soviet Russia, contextualising the Kremlin's evolving use of a discourse of multi-ethnic peoplehood. In the remainder of the article, I outline the methods used to collect residents' narratives, and discuss key themes identified across them. The findings show that in Kazan the discourse of multi-ethnic peoplehood is an accessible resource for constructing belonging, and simultaneously a problematic basis for nation-building. The discussion highlights the importance of attending to the role of regional and ethnic subject positions in Russian nationalism.

Nation-building in multi-ethnic states – towards a bottom-up approach

The ambition for cultural homogeneity within a polity is not specific to nationalist thought but is more broadly a project of modernity (Mandelbaum 2014). However, from a nationalist perspective it is compelling because it offers a route to protecting the purity of the nation. The nation is conceived from the start as a group that is culturally consistent, bound by historically grounded traditions, myths and memories that define it (Smith 1986). The nation also stands for a self-referential community of shared belonging. In other words, it is seen as unified not only by objective commonalities, but also subjectively by a feeling of, and desire for togetherness or a 'common will in the present' (Renan 1996). Unity is thus a fundamental principle of nationalist logic. Taken together with the principle of self-determination, this creates an ideological motivation for pursuing purity, and thus homogeneity, and limiting or controlling diversity within a nation-state. This motivation is reinforced by powerful political incentives: both national identity and national unity are understood to support a state's political legitimacy, and this understanding bears out empirically, at least to some extent (Shulman & Bloom 2014). Furthermore, marginalised working class segments of

ethnic majority populations are attracted by promises of restoring national purity that attribute value to the core group (Hochschild 2016). It is therefore unsurprising that nation-building, the process of aligning mass national identity with a state's borders, often goes hand in hand with efforts to reduce diversity. Williams and Smith (1983, p. 10) go so far as to define nation-building as 'an instrument for implanting a sense of national solidarity and consciousness, and of homogenizing and levelling heterogeneous and stratified populations'. In this understanding, interest in preserving cultural diversity is directly at odds with nation-building.

The tension between national unity and ethnic diversity has been widely debated in the nationalism and nation-building literatures. Coercive nationalization and expulsion of minorities from state territory are among more aggressive mechanisms for homogenizing identity across a population, documented as part of nation-building efforts throughout the modern era (Malešević 2019). However, ethnic diversity within a state need not necessarily result in such outcomes. Cases such as Switzerland and India at the time of its founding are often brought to support the idea that nation-building can be compatible with ethnic diversity (Wimmer 2011; Tudor 2018). In response to the rise of exclusivist ethnonationalist movements globally, this premise has spurred scholars and political actors to explore the possibilities of alternative, inclusive forms of nationalism (Norman 2006; Uberoi & Modood 2013; Antonsich, Mavroudi & Mihelj 2016). What is clear is that diversity generally presents an obstacle to the goals of nation-building that state authorities must manage (Irgengioro 2018; Hoefte & Venendaal 2019). Political ideology shapes how states approach this problem. In Western democracies, conservative nationalists advocate tightly limiting immigration and access to citizenship for new arrivals. Liberal nationalists instead focus on the benefits of integrating non-core groups into a shared community, while multiculturalist nationalists typically emphasise equal cultural rights (Dikici 2022). Geopolitical factors, such as ties between non-core groups and external powers, also shape states' approaches to managing diversity (Mylonas 2012). Yet, despite the differences, the nationalist tendency towards homogenization reappears in different geopolitical contexts and across the political spectrum. Even forms of nationalism that rest on concepts of inclusivity, diversity and equal rights typically prioritise the nation's purity (Mavroudi 2010). This prioritization presents a justification for homogenizing policies. There is therefore a need to understand the tension between minority ethnic and state national identities as one that recurs in new guises, and to examine critically how it plays out in a given context.

An important manifestation of the tension between national unity and diversity lies in the promotion of multi-ethnic nationhood. The adoption of official discourse hailing unity in diversity as a national trait is a common feature

of states' approaches to managing diversity (Wimmer 2011; Irgengioro 2018). The tension between unity and diversity is presented by nation builders as resolved, with diversity given symbolic value, and cast as a factor of national pride. However, across a wide range of contexts, studies have shown that the diffusion of such discourses can conceal the subordination and control of non-core ethno-national identities. Favell (2022) argues that the integrationist ideal behind discourses of unity in diversity in former colonial centres upholds a racialised global hierarchy of nationalities. This is evidenced by Silk (2015, p. 79), who observes that the narrative of Britain conveyed in the Opening Ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games presents a vision of the nation as accepting of diverse origins only provided these are muted in conformity with sanctioned 'British' values. Similarly, casting equality and appreciation of difference as national ideals can better serve nation-building than the interests of marginalised groups. In the US, a mainstreamed discourse of diversity connoting national values of tolerance and equality has obfuscated the reality of racial inequalities, and contributes to the exclusion of non-white experiences of being American (Bell & Hartmann 2007). The symbolic value of diverse nationhood can also be monetised, with transnational effects on minorities. In Laos, the government has used a discourse of multi-ethnic nationhood to appeal to foreign tourists with a curated experience of 'authentic' traditional life that masks accelerated pressure on less numerous ethnic groups to conform with standardised Lao culture (Goudineau 2015). In each of these cases, sanitised discourses of diversity are used to support majority group, visions of the nation and downplay the tension between national unity and plural identities.

While there is abundant literature on the exploitation of discourses of diversity in nation-building across political contexts, less is known about how such discourses are interpreted and engaged from the bottom up. This is an important gap because although elites have tools at their disposition to foster national identity as they envision it, the course of nation-building is also shaped from below. Ideas about the nation provided in official discourses are negotiated in everyday life in ways that do not always align with the intentions of nation-builders (Polese *et al.* 2018). Even in authoritarian conditions, everyday talk of the nation does not necessarily follow the pattern of a coherent state discourse, but borrows from different discourses in the public domain, taking shape through interaction with others, and in measure of other identities (Rohava 2018). Furthermore, when an official discourse of the nation is widely adopted, the connotations it takes on may not support nation-building agendas (Goode 2016).

A starting point for exploring bottom-up engagement of discourses of diverse nationhood is the work of geographers exposing how ordinary people interpret and remake the nation in places where multiple ethnic, racial, cultural and religious identities coexist. Adopting a focus on bottom-up agency from scholarship on everyday

nationhood (Knott 2015), they have shown how experiences of diversity are processed through reflective engagement with the meanings and boundaries of nationhood (Antonsich 2018b; Erdal & Strømsø 2021; Lo Presti 2021; Wood 2022). This article builds on this insight to inform a bottom-up inquiry into the effects of discourses of multi-ethnic nationhood on nation-building. How do ordinary people living in diverse communities engage with elite discourses framing diversity as a feature of the nation? Discourses of the nation are shared and become mainstream through both horizontal and vertical networks (Kaufmann 2017). This means that the use of particular themes in expressions of nationhood needs to be understood in relation to everyday micro-contexts, but also to top-down nation-building efforts. With this in mind, this article seeks to bring attention to how ordinary people interpret, qualify, contest and subvert discourses of diverse nationhood already in public circulation.

At the same time, my interest is not in how people respond to an official framing of the diverse nation in the abstract, but in the context of a local lived reality of ethnic and religious coexistence. To this end, I approach everyday acts of expressing nationhood as instances of individuals' use of nationalist ideology (and public discourse) to interpret and navigate the world. I draw on theory of ideological dilemmas, which provides a useful lens for understanding how active reflection on the nation is stimulated by everyday encounters. This theory posits that ideology does not operate through a straightforward reproduction of instilled principles that guide people's unreflective thought. Rather, we bring ideological themes or principles into creative interplay to interpret complex situations and puzzles in everyday life, often reconstructing or qualifying the principles themselves (Billig *et al.* 1988). Attending to reflective discourse, we can observe that nationalism functions as an 'engaged ideology', one whose principles we regularly rethink in response to dilemmas that emerge as we make sense of life (Wilmers 2022a). The ideological principle that nations are culturally unified entities is generally taken as assumed shared knowledge in modern societies (Billig 1995). It is the banality of this principle that renders encounters with diversity 'edges of the nation', i.e. temporal, political and spatial settings in which the nation becomes the subject of conscious thought and emotion (Fox 2017). Our assumptions about national unity can be disrupted and stimulate reflection, for example when the subject of immigration is raised (Skey 2011, p. 72). Examined in the context of public discourses on the subject, ordinary people's ways of navigating the dilemma between national unity and diversity have important implications for nation-building among sub-sets of a population.

Turning to the Russian context breaks from the geographic focus of many studies on the bottom-up navigation of diversity and nationhood, which skews towards 'migration states' in Western Europe, North America and

Australasia (Hollifield 2004). This bias in the literature means that it largely reflects concerns and experiences of diversity relating to recent immigration. However, diversity and ethnic inequality are not exclusive to such conditions. It is important to bring to this conversation insights from contexts where ethnic and religious plurality has been the norm for many generations. Existing debate also mostly concerns established democracies, where agency in constructing political narratives is valued and self-censorship more limited (Koch 2013). Attending to non-democratic cases can elucidate how diversity and nationhood are navigated when people are incentivised to avoid contradicting official discourse. Recent studies of established diversity and nationhood in post-Soviet states, notably from Kazakhstan, have begun to diversify the geographic scope of the literature, although they are still rarely brought into discussion of everyday nationhood beyond the region (Jašina-Schäfer 2019a; Sharipova 2020). This study seeks to address this gap.

The post-Soviet construction of a multi-ethnic Russian people

Russian elites faced a unique tangle of challenges in building a state-aligned national identity after the demise of the USSR. New state borders demarcated a territory home to 193 officially recognised ethnic groups besides Russians, comprising around one fifth of the population. At the sub-state level, it included 21 republics, designated by Soviet precedent as autonomous homelands of non-Russian ethnic groups.¹ The republics in the North Caucasus and the Volga region were home to sizeable Muslim populations. These conditions compromised the potential for a nation statehood based on ethnic Russian and Orthodox Christian culture. This was compounded by a population highly attuned to ethnicity, which in the Soviet period had been legally attributed to individuals through the internal passport system, and circumscribed through the promotion of curated repertoires of ethnic heritage focused on folkloric ‘great traditions’ (Slezkine 1994). Altogether, official precedent on the categorization of the state’s territory and people supported the development of sub-state loyalties (Gorenburg 2003). In this context, ethno-nationalist and regional sovereignty movements had flourished as the Soviet Union withered, necessitating accommodation within any new narrative of national unity. Moreover, the state was saddled with the identity of heir of the USSR, and its

¹ The Constitution of the Russian Federation, 1993, available at: <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-01.htm>, accessed 2 January 2023

tarnished credentials as a unifier of diverse groups. This legacy loomed large, with no history of civic nation statehood to supplant it in the national imagination (Hosking 1998).

Yeltsin championed the idea of multi-ethnicity as an inherent, enduring characteristic of the Russian people. His vision reflected an imperialist understanding, core to Eurasianist visions of Russia, in which the state was constituted through a voluntary union of peoples, taking the form of tsarist empire, the USSR, and now a post-Soviet multi-ethnic state (Tolz 1998). Under Yeltsin's leadership, Russia was re-formed as an ethnoterritorial federation, following Soviet tradition in bestowing autonomous governance on titular minorities, and reinstating the link between ethnicity and territory.² At the same time, the state constitution identified Russia's new citizenry as 'united by a common fate on our land'.³ This framing formalised a discursive basis from which to build a Russian identity shared by distinct peoples.

This vision coexisted in official discourse with a civic basis for nationhood, advanced by Yeltsin's liberal supporters, who saw Western democratic and capitalist economies as a model (Tuminez 2000, p. 188). The 1996 Nationalities Policy outlined a path combining civic political unity with ethnic cultural diversity, in what Codagnone and Filippov (2000) term 'multicultural constitutional patriotism'. Official narratives grounded Russia historically in events that unified the public without denying ethno-national and religious difference (Tolz 1998). Although Yeltsin sought to distance the new state from its predecessor ideologically and politically, he invoked aspects of the Soviet experience to bolster the legitimacy of his administration amid painful reforms (Sharafutdinova 2020, pp. 87–88). He revived the symbol of victory in the Great Patriotic War, renewing Soviet discourses of the enduring greatness of the (multi-ethnic yet unified) people. He also wielded imperial symbolism, rooting the relationship between the peoples in a deeper past, and signposting a special, leading role for ethnic Russians.

Yeltsin struggled to accommodate conflicting visions of the nation among elites, and was judged to have produced a mottled and unconvincing narrative (Shevel 2011). Focusing more on economic reforms and political struggles than public relations, he failed to show timely leadership in addressing the negative sense of collective self ushered in by the loss of Soviet identity and compounded by a rocky trajectory of economic reforms (Sharafutdinova

² Regions negotiated different agreements with Moscow, resulting in an 'asymmetric' federation. In the stand-out case of Tatarstan, the republic gained control over its budget and taxes, and the right to conduct economic affairs and international relations independently of Moscow (Williams 2011).

³ The Constitution of the Russian Federation, 1993, available at: <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-01.htm>, accessed 2 January 2023

2020, pp. 85–86). His endorsement of the term *rossiyanin*, denoting Russian in the civic sense as opposed to the ethnic *russkii*, fell flat due to perceptions that it designated a newly created group lacking historical continuity (Blackburn 2018). The abolishment of the ‘fifth line’ in passports, which identified ethnicity as central to identity, was deeply unpopular among minorities (Akturk 2010). Levels of autonomy agreed with different republics were deemed insufficient by titular nationalist groups, while Russian ethno-nationalists viewed them as continuing a Soviet victimization of Russians (Codagnone & Filippov 2000). As Yeltsin’s efforts to navigate the tension between unity and diversity met resistance from different camps, a viable vision for the nation remained elusive. When Putin came to power, conditions were ripe for a stronger nation-building steer.

The limits to multi-ethnicity in Putin’s centralised state

From the start Putin pursued a clear path of cultural homogenization for Russia, creating distance from both the Soviet codification of people and territories and European multiculturalist approaches (Prina 2011). He also distinguished his vision of Russia’s path as a multi-ethnic state from that suggested by Yeltsin’s policies. A heavy-handed response to war in Chechnya solidified his image as a strong leader who would stamp out extremism and disloyalty in wayward republics (Hale 2016). Russia’s diversity thus became a pretext for top-down control. In line with a strongman discourse positioning him at Russia’s helm, Putin created a ‘power vertical’, centralizing governance. Under his leadership, the claim of combatting extremism was used to justify successive reforms reducing regional autonomy and eroding minority cultural protections (Prina 2021). This contributed to a securitization of ethnic identity that bred fear and self-censorship around the expression of non-Russian ethnic identity (Yusupova 2019). Simultaneously, Putin constructed patriotism as the glue that sticks Russians of different backgrounds together, promoting a civic vision that minimises difference (Blakkisrud 2022). For minorities, assimilation has become both culturally normative and politically astute, while practices highlighting non-Russian identity have to be explicitly depoliticised.

Nevertheless, Putin has continued to highlight Russia’s multi-ethnicity as a point of pride in his speeches. Indeed, from 2012 to 2019, this was among the most consistent themes in his characterization of the Russian nation (Laine 2020). How does this vision square with the systematic squeezing of non-Russian ethnic identities? A passage in Putin’s 2019 speech to the Valdai Discussion Club is telling in this regard:

Russia, by the way, from the very start of its creation, its formation, has been a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional state. In well-known ways this is a state-civilization, which has organically absorbed many traditions and cultures, protected their identities and uniqueness, and at the same time preserved unity, importantly, the unity of the peoples living within it. We are very proud of this harmony of the identities and commonality of fate of the peoples of the Russian Federation and hold it very dear. (Putin 2019)

Putin notes the harmony of distinct religious and ethnic minority populations in Russia, and speaks of the state as protecting difference. Yet, he also refers also to Russia as absorbing and unifying cultures. Consolidated in official communications during Putin's third term and now widely accepted among the public, this 'state-civilization' discourse conceives Russia as a deep-rooted voluntary union of peoples, coalescing around ethnic Russian culture and statehood (Tsygankov 2016; Hale & Laruelle 2020). The emphasis on the will to be part of Russia supports both nation-building and regime legitimation as it incorporates into the nation all people aligned with the state, politically as well as culturally. The discourse provides a logic for the state's expansionist and interventionist actions, including in Ukraine. As under Yeltsin, such logic builds on the Soviet conception of Russians as leaders among equals, which in turn echoed earlier imperial visions of Russia's peoples (Semenenko 2015).

Multi-ethnic and civilizational themes coexist in official discourse with multiple others, variously constructing Russia in imperial, civic, ethnic, victorious and moral terms (Laine 2020; Aksiumov & Avksentev 2022; Blakkisrud 2022). In public addresses, Putin has recombined themes, strategically accenting the vision of the nation most appropriate in light of salient issues in domestic politics (Blakkisrud 2016). This discursive balance is evident in the revised state constitution of 2020, in an amendment seeming to respond to controversy in Russia's republics around reforms restricting minority language education (Arutyunova & Zamyatin 2021). Following the existing declaration of Russian as the state language in article 68, the 2020 version introduces a legally redundant but symbolically laden designation of Russian: 'as the language of the state-forming nation that is a part of the multi-ethnic union of equal peoples of the Russian Federation' (*Gosudarstvennaya Duma Federal'nogo Sobraniya Rossiiskoi Federatsii* 2020; Sadowski 2021). The amendment cements a qualified vision of the equality of ethnicities.

Amid Russia's increasing isolation from the West, federal references to a multi-ethnic people now signal less the legitimacy of ethnic difference within the nation than its unity despite diversity. National Unity Day, a national holiday since 2005, celebrates not plurality but cross-ethnic patriotism, tracing it back to the 1612 defence of Nizhny Novgorod against Polish-Lithuanian forces (Omelicheva 2017). Following the annexation of Crimea, the discourse

has been used to support a narrative of moral superiority over the West in a time of worsening diplomatic relations. Tolz (2017) shows that in coverage of the 2015-16 refugee crisis in Europe, Kremlin-aligned media highlighted the unity of Russians in contrast to ethno-racial tensions elsewhere. In the 2021 National Security Strategy, unity is emphasised as a Russian value, threatened by hostile Western forces intent on sowing divisions between ethnicities through informational and psychological warfare (The Kremlin 2021). From this standpoint, minority resistance to centralizing reforms is the concoction of external enemies, rather than the reactive expression of legitimate grievances in the face of assimilative pressure. References to Russia's 'cultural sovereignty' facing external threats and *rossiiskaya* (statist Russian) national culture in the Strategy advance a trend towards presenting Russia primarily as a nation-state with a dominant, assimilating cultural heritage, while continuing to pay lip service to the idea of a multi-ethnic people (The Kremlin 2021).

Methods

The discussion draws on an analysis of transcripts from 35 face-to-face interviews conducted with residents of Kazan as part of a broader study on narratives of the nation. As capital of the Republic of Tatarstan and home to an ethnically and religiously mixed population, Kazan presents an instructive case for exploring how local experiences of diversity interact with the federal discourse of Russians as a multi-ethnic people. In Tatarstan, Katie Stewart (2021) observes that official celebrations of National Unity Day have emphasised local support of diversity, departing from the federal prioritization of unity. Meanwhile, she shows, ethnic Russian activists have used the holiday to protest regional cultural policies supporting the Tatar language, problematizing federal and regional accounts of harmonious coexistence. This supports evidence elsewhere that top-down discourses about the nation's diversity provoke different responses from people marked as 'other', as compared with the unmarked majority. For example, talk of 'integration' can alienate people with minority backgrounds by idealizing homogeneity (Moffitt, Juang & Syed 2018). This variation deserves attention given that minorities play an important role in shaping popular narratives of the majority nation (Polese *et al.* 2020).

Interviewees were identified using snowball sampling, starting from my existing networks and gradually widening the pool of contacts. Extended narratives were necessary to capture the reflective processes through which people travel in forming opinions and interpreting official discourses. The semi-structured interview format, best-

suiting to enable this, necessitated trust at the recruitment stage, and gatekeepers were instrumental in enabling this. I briefed potential participants identified by contacts on myself, the project and the interview by phone or in person. While not seeking a representative sample, I aimed to capture different experiences of being a resident of Kazan and a Russian national, using a sample guide and a post-interview questionnaire to aid recruitment at multiple intersections of ethnicity, age, gender and level of education. Participants ultimately comprised 14 men and 21 women. Among them, 13 identified their ethnicity as Russian, 17 as Tatar and 5 as another ethnicity. Eight participants were aged 18-29, 16 were aged 30-39, 5 were aged 40-49 and 6 were aged 50 and above. While the final sample was diverse along most parameters, most people without higher education approached declined to take part, with only three ultimately included. Time was often cited as a constraint, and some reacted to the request with unease. This could be due to limited exposure to foreigners and exposure to anti-Western commentary on state television. Those in precarious circumstances may have feared repercussions.

Even among willing participants, it was important to mitigate trust barriers faced by foreign researchers conducting interviews in Russia (Voldnes *et al.* 2014). My positionality as a British researcher at a time of deteriorating diplomatic relations between the UK and Russia may have been a reason for caution among some participants. In order to facilitate an open dynamic for narrative reflection, I sought rapport with interviewees through prior conversations (Riessman 2008). Interviews took place in Russian, except at the request of the participant. Interviewees displayed varying levels of comfort with the interview process. Some expressed enjoyment of the chance to talk through issues that troubled or stimulated them and be listened to in confidence. Others kept answers brief and/or rejected questions they found too political. Cautious attitudes have been observed in research in other authoritarian post-Soviet societies, in line with a social norm of withholding political opinions in public (Koch 2013). The micro-level, intersubjective context and the macro-level cultural and political setting were therefore factored into the analysis. Following Holstein and Gubrium's (2004) 'active interview' approach, I attended to the interaction of subject matter constructed in interview with the process of its construction. Participants' words are not interpreted as quantifiable proxies for fixed belief, opinion or emotional disposition towards a discourse. Instead, they indicate a willingness to construct a particular narrative, and a level of comfort in using and adapting particular discursive resources.

The core questions in the topic guide invited participants to reflect on the concepts of homeland and people, life in Russia today and in the past, and expectations for the future. There is no exact equivalent term to 'nation' in

Russian, and I avoided related concepts such as *natsional'nost'* or *natsiya*, which have ethnic connotations. My use instead of *rodina* (motherland) and *narod* (the people) provided the necessary prompts to guide discussion to themes of belonging and nationhood without restricting it to ethnicity. To conclude, participants were asked to comment on a series of headlines and images from Russian media and publicity that captured specific public discourses about the nation. This prompted for responses to the discourse among those who had not mentioned it spontaneously.

In the thematic coding of transcripts, I initially identified constructions of nationalist principles and dilemmas in participants' narratives. In subsequent stages, coding was largely inductive in that patterns found were used to modify the research questions, and revise codes and sub-codes (Braun & Clarke 2006). I also used narrative analysis to examine ordering, weighting and interaction in the construction of dilemmas. In initial coding, the dilemma between unity and diversity emerged as especially prominent. This led to a separate line of analysis that formed the basis of this article. The most prevalent sub-themes identified through subsequent coding structure the three-part discussion below. I used pseudonyms to protect interviewees' anonymity.

Russia's unity in diversity as a locally relatable ideal

The presence of different cultures, religions and languages coexisting in daily life in Kazan appears to provide residents with a tangible basis from which to relate to the discourse of Russia as a multi-ethnic people. In speaking about Russia, most participants spontaneously highlighted the multi-ethnic composition of the country. Many described Russia's multi-ethnicity in positive terms, claiming a lived reality of civic values such as respect, tolerance and appreciation of diversity. As Georgii, a 31-year-old Russian teacher, explained: 'The fact that we are different enriches us, it doesn't get in the way of people living together. People value it. People respect it.'⁴ Several participants were keen to elaborate, bringing to bear both personal and generalised experiences to authenticate their claims. These were rooted in locally ubiquitous contexts of plurality: mixed families, friendship groups, neighbourhoods, workplaces and educational settings. A popular example given was that of cross-community gestures on religious holidays:

Respect between one religion and another - that binds us together too, it binds us together really strongly. For example, we just had Easter. We painted eggs, but you know, I don't have that [in my culture] but I've always liked it. I was with my mother and we painted eggs together and wrote on WhatsApp 'We're [celebrating]

⁴ Interview with Georgii, teacher, 31, Kazan, 4 May 2018

with you too'. And they also send us greetings on our holidays. It's respect for each other. (Zukhra, Tatar, pensioner, 57)⁵

Zukhra situates herself in the multi-ethnic nation, emphasizing her active enjoyment of diversity in her social circle, and with this, casting respectful interethnic relations as uniting Russians. Her reference to a recent occasion and the casual practice of exchanging messages suggests an ordinariness to such relations, even if the practice occurs at special times of year when difference is exposed and celebrated. Invoking casual behaviours, she seeks to authenticate her claim of respectful culture, reaffirming the mainstream presentation of Russia's diversity as harmonious and organic. Sofia, a 35-year-old Jewish PR consultant, recalls a public celebration of diversity as sparking personal appreciation of Russia's multiethnicity:

Sofia: You should have come in August when we have our ethnic festival, Krutushka.

Interviewer: What is it?

Sofia: It's a festival of ethnic music, where you truly get really authentic representatives of different nationalities. And you immediately start thinking about how enormous Russia is, and that we have Buryats, and Khakas, and all kinds of Caucasian [ethnicities], and Chuvashes and Mordovians. That's all inside. It fascinates me. I love it because it really speaks to me.⁶

A PR professional, Sofia is skilled at constructing evocative narratives. Some interviewees did not relay such details or emotions, simply testifying to Russia's diversity along the lines of official discourse, or giving perfunctory examples. Yet, even in these cases, interviewees readily reached for local experience to authenticate Russia's multi-ethnic harmony. Talking about the difference between the ethnic and civic terms for Russian, Pavel, a 32-year-old Russian lighting engineer, notes: 'Specifically in Russia, I mean, we have such a mix of ethnicities, specifically in Tatarstan, right? The Volga region here is full of ethnicities, Russians and Tatars, and we have all sorts of other ethnicities side by side'.⁷ Alyona, a 24-year-old Kreshen Tatar musician, uses the Soviet cliché of friendship to claim that immigration is inconsequential in a harmoniously diverse society: 'We have a republic and a country that is multi-ethnic anyway, we don't notice [immigration]... We even have festivals, there are these processions of delegates, always with someone from each people in national costume... That shows the friendship of the peoples.'⁸

⁵ Interview with Zukhra, pensioner, 57, Kazan, 22 April 2018

⁶ Interview with Sofia, PR consultant, 35, Kazan, 3 October 2017

⁷ Interview with Pavel, lighting engineer, 32, Kazan, 28 September 2017

⁸ Interview with Alyona, musician, 24, Kazan, 1 October 2017

Such narratives illustrate a performed conformity with official politics of nationhood. The sense of a multi-ethnic people united in diversity was affirmed even among some who expressed general scepticism towards state messaging. Tamara, a 46-year-old Jewish psychologist, says: 'I'm glad that we have this unity, that it's not some kind of show (*pokazukha*), because we are used to the authorities sending things down to us from on high, and to pretending to engage in something but not doing it from the heart.'⁹

This rosy picture painted repeatedly by interviewees of different age groups, professions and ethnicities appears too good to be true. Indeed, interviewees expressed awareness of this. Many depicted such harmony as special and unique, a source of collective pride worth dwelling upon. Driving the narrative is an implicit tension evoked by the multi-ethnic condition, a dilemma between unity and diversity that must be put to rest in explaining the case of Russia to an outsider. As Georgii says: 'The thing is, here, in our country, that's what unique about it. That people from a great number of nationalities live together, but still it doesn't become, I mean, the unique features of each culture endure. People don't see a problem with that. On the contrary, it's a plus.' (Georgii, Russian, teacher, 31).¹⁰ Similarly, Varvara, a 66-year-old Russian pensioner, affirms: 'We never fought with anyone, we actually always strived for unity.'¹¹ Here, 'actually' suggests a desire to put right misperceptions of Russia anticipated of a Western researcher, whose presence heightens the sense of dilemma. In these examples, as in many of the interviews, the idea of harmonious unity in diversity is depoliticised, simultaneously claimed as part of everyday life and attributed a mystical, idealised quality.

Managing mismatch between ideal and reality

The discussion so far has illustrated conformity with the official discourse of multi-ethnic nationhood, with claims of unity in diversity rooted in positive experiences of community across ethnic difference. However, in many interviews, such experiences formed only part of the story, and interviewees brought up a sense of complexity to the relationship between unity and diversity, absent from official narratives of multi-ethnicity. Most commonly, this was expressed in accounts of assimilation and political grievances.

⁹ Interview with Tamara, psychologist, 46, Kazan, 25 April 2018

¹⁰ Interview with Georgii, teacher, 31, Kazan, 4 May 2018

¹¹ Interview with Varvara, pensioner, 66, Kazan, 28 April 2018

Assimilation

Inter-ethnic mixing and the homogeneity of modern everyday life in a shared state were presented by some as challenges to the prospects for plurality. In these accounts, everyday existence was seen to wear down difference.

You won't find pure Russians in our country, because the Soviet Union lasted a long time, and now, what is left of it, people go back and forth, marry one another, and it's already pretty hard to delineate particular nationalities. Here in Kazan they still hold on to national culture, but still. (Mikhail, Russian, psychologist, 67)¹²

This is also a question, right? If a culture doesn't preserve itself, doesn't develop, then maybe it's a process of cultural natural selection. There is a process of evolution, and evolution of cultures, including when they start to interact. I don't think it's a bad thing. At least not in the form it's taking now, as long as it's not aggressively imposed. (Dawit, Bashkir, writer, 25)¹³

Mikhail and Dawit both point out the reality of cultural assimilation, which, they imply, counters an expectation held by others that ethnic groups should remain pure. In highlighting this trend, they confront the dilemma between unity and diversity, judging that the development of a unified culture through historical coexistence cannot be perfectly balanced with the preservation of distinct groups. While these narratives do not express criticism of state actions or regret about assimilation, they pose a deliberate question mark over the concept of a multi-ethnic people.

As Billig *et al.* (1988) note, dilemmas are actively negotiated even in affirming an ideological discourse. From different perspectives, Mikhail and Dawit manage the dilemma they identify by qualifying their understanding of the multi-ethnic people and normalizing loss of difference over time. Mikhail constructs an equivalence in the erosion of Russian and non-Russian ethnicities, comparing genetically mixed backgrounds among Russians to the weakening of Tatar culture. In doing so, he disregards the preferential structural conditions that afford his own, Russian, identity protections unavailable to Tatars, and more so to non-titular minorities. Dawit, for his part, acknowledges the unequal direction of assimilation between Russian and non-Russian cultures, and addresses this using the official discourse of a naturally superior Russian culture absorbing others, including his own. In portraying (minority) cultural loss as natural, both participants distance themselves from politically controversial grievances in a

¹² Interview with Mikhail, psychologist, 67, Kazan, 25 April 2018

¹³ Interview with Dawit, writer, 25, Kazan, 5 May 2018

context in which ethnic claims are heavily securitised. Still, without abandoning the ideal of Russia as a multi-ethnic people, they express doubt over its balanced condition. Seen from this perspective, the eventful performance of ethnicity amounts to a symbolic preservation of difference that can only stand in for a stable coexistence of cultures.

Political grievances

Recent protests in Kazan surrounding language education reforms were raised by several interviewees in talking about plural identities within Russia. While these reforms may have registered weakly with the public in predominantly ethnic Russian cities, in Kazan they were widely noticed as they impacted directly on all children's education. Thinking about the reforms and/or protests for and against brought pause for thought in narratives of harmony and unity across difference.

Unfortunately, difference sometimes expresses itself in radical forms, though now that has practically disappeared, as far as I can see... I think everything is more peaceful now [than in the 1990s] in terms of dialogue between cultures, in terms of nations. But then again, like I said, this reform has seriously shaken society, I mean it's had a big resonance in society. (Valeria, Russian, teacher, 30)¹⁴

Here, protests in defence of compulsory Tatar education are constructed as a break in a two-decade long trend of peaceful interethnic relations. Ethnic claims are presented as a feature of coexistence that means an always-present potential for disruptive, 'radical forms' of difference – following a theme in official discourse. In Valeria's narrative, awareness of recent local protests brings a desire to acknowledge the tension between unity and diversity, qualifying her confidence in the consistency of harmony.

Distant from the grievances of protestors, Valeria reflects on weaknesses in the unity of the Russian nation, without attributing great concern to this threat. By contrast, some participants highlighted instead the threat to Russia's diversity, and reported feeling concerned enough to actively contribute to its protection. Discussing his fears for the future of Tatar identity, Rasul, a 33-year-old Tatar teacher, describes recently joining efforts to combat young peoples' assimilation: 'I would like to preserve my people, my language. Actually, I'm doing something right now... I started a YouTube channel.'¹⁵ Such efforts were reported not only by Tatar participants, confirming evidence that the conflict over language education has not fallen strictly along ethnic lines (Arutyunova & Zamyatin 2021). Vera, a 33-year-old Russian graphic designer and playwright, describes a new theatre project she is involved in: 'The show that we have

¹⁴ Interview with Valeria, teacher, 30, Kazan, 22 September 2017

¹⁵ Interview with Rasul, teacher, 33, Kazan, 7 May 2018

been putting together is not exactly about teaching, but it's about understanding - lack of understanding of the Tatar language.... It's a heated topic.'¹⁶

A few participants explicitly argued that the state's actions undermined the idea of Russia's enduring and harmonious diversity: 'They say that we are a multi-national people and our beauty is in the fact that we are diverse. How are we diverse? Is it really diversity when you can't study your native language in school?' (Marat, Tatar, museum worker, 32).¹⁷ Marat's disillusionment in the language reforms seems compounded by his awareness of an official discourse constructing the relationship between Russia and its minorities as natural and mutually nurturing. He goes on to describe a more general alienation from Russia:

For me, Russia is something big and incomprehensible in light of the most recent events with the Tatar language, the Tatar culture, an unpredictable and aggressive thing... It's not a big, sunny meadow where lots of different peoples live. I don't believe in those fairy tales. I can see that there is a lot of injustice.

In this context, everyday cultural exchange can start to be perceived as a threat to diversity, and not a cause for celebrating unity. Marat explains:

I mean, neighbours live well together, Russians and Tatars, when Russians come around to Tatars' houses to drink vodka. But I believe that Tatars drinking vodka and letting their children marry Russians – maybe my view is fundamentalist, nationalistic, medieval - but I believe that it's a crime against our grandmothers and grandfathers, and against our grandchildren.

Marat's reference to vodka drinking as an assimilating cultural practice speaks to the growing role of Islam as an identifier among Tatars, and the trend towards marking religious as well as ethnic boundaries in everyday practices and spaces in Tatarstan (Karimova 2014; Yusupova 2018). Rasul, cited above, similarly describes losing a sense of unity with Russians in everyday contexts:

Well, when I was growing up, well, partially I felt that Russia is my homeland, when some team, our related team played some international games, I was for Russia. But now, you know, it's different. I can't explain it. I feel a bit ashamed of it, but deep down I can answer myself that I can explain this, why this is happening. I mean, and I think you understand me. (Rasul, Tatar, teacher, 33)¹⁸

¹⁶ Interview with Vera, graphic designer, 33, Kazan, 11 May 2018

¹⁷ Interview with Marat, museum worker, 32, Kazan, 8 May 2018

¹⁸ Interview with Rasul, teacher, 33, Kazan, 7 May 2018

Diversity is raised in these narratives as an everyday lived reality, but one that does not conjure feelings of Russian pride, unity or belonging. The notion of a unified multi-ethnic people is undermined by the perception of state actions as those of a Russia above and against its minorities, rather than inclusive of them. While many readily draw on everyday local interactions between ethnic groups to illustrate the authenticity of multi-ethnic nationhood, displays of personal distancing from everyday ‘unity in diversity’ practices among others suggest a rejection of this discourse. To elaborate this position in repressive conditions involves a willingness to confide and dwell on painful and potentially risky subjects (negotiated above by Marat and Rasul through self-critical asides), and trust in the researcher’s guarantee of anonymity. The few examples captured suggest a potentially more widespread cynical engagement with ‘inclusive’ discourses of the Russian nation, as it clashes with experiences and emotions of cultural loss.

Diversity without national unity

A further weakness in the nation-building potential of the discourse of multi-ethnic peoplehood in Kazan emerges in narratives of belonging to a diverse homeland or people that did not reinforce the notion of a unified Russian nation. These followed two narrative plots: a resolution of the dilemma between unity and diversity that emphasised difference, and an interpretation of unity in diversity as a feature unique to Tatarstan.

Multi-ethnicity as difference

In contrast to the emphasis on unity in federal discourse on multi-ethnic Russia, many interviewees rather noted difference or non-animosity in discussing this subject, indicating that the legacy of the Soviet institutionalization of ethnic identity endures. Asked what unifies the peoples of Russia, Laysan, a 67-year old Tatar teacher, talks about tolerance and celebration of one another’s customs, noting: ‘We are very friendly to each other because we are not enemies, we are not even opponents. Why should opponents live in one country? We should be very, very friendly.’¹⁹ The Soviet metaphor of friendship to describe inter-ethnic relations continues to be readily used, including among younger generations. Responding to the same question, Alyona, a 24-year-old Kreshen Tatar musician, reflects:

It’s amazing. Russia is very multi-ethnic. I always think that it’s impossible to understand, you can only experience it. The Soviet Union fell apart, but that didn’t happen in Russia. The peoples were very friendly

¹⁹ Interview with Laysan, teacher, 67, Kazan, 3 October 2017

with each other, they still are and will be. It's tolerance too, because all the peoples relate to each other with tolerance. That comes from upbringing and culture. There is no inter-ethnic animosity and, God willing, there never will be.²⁰

Whether or not it corresponds to the reality of daily life in the city, the picture these interviewees wish to convey is one of parallel communities long accustomed to accepting coexistence. While plurality of cultures is readily characterised, pinpointing cultural unifiers beyond a common appreciation of difference often proved more challenging. Asked what 'the people' meant to him, Georgii, a 31-year-old Russian teacher, answered: 'To me, the Russian people... it's hard to answer that question, to be honest... It's like, there are lots of nationalities. Well, we are all Russians (*rossiyane*), citizens of Russia are Russians, but still, we clearly know who is Russian, Tatar, Udmurt, Chuvash and so on.'²¹ Although not prompted to talk about diversity, Georgii expresses Russians' unity as limited to formal citizenship, while he links people's identity, who they *are* and are recognised as, to ethnicity.

Not only do Russian cultural commonalities seem hard to specify, but the idea of Russians feeling as one is portrayed as dubious in the eyes of some interviewees. Looking at a prompt sheet with headlines and images illustrating different conceptions of Russia, Darina, a 28-year-old Russian musician, responds as follows to the headline 'The Russian nation [*rossiiskaya natsiya*] – an attempt to resurrect the Soviet people'^{22 23}: 'I don't think people would understand the need to unite us. On the contrary, we're going more in the direction of 'we're Tatars, look at our culture'; 'we're Russians - we have such and such'. I mean, we don't fight, we express ourselves.'

Laysan, Alyona, Georgii and Darina all withhold criticism of the state and affirm feelings of belonging and pride towards Russia. Yet, they present a limited sense of Russia as a nation that rejects the premise of assimilation. In their narratives, Russian national unity appears secondary to the separate ethnic identities contained by the state. The impact of the local context of experienced and constructed diversity must be accounted for in understanding this perspective. Tatar cultural nationalism has become increasingly visible in Kazan in the absence of space for political claims (Yusupova 2018). Darina (above) talks about moving from a more ethnically homogenous city in a neighbouring region: 'Until I came to Kazan, I didn't think about nationality at all'. While the discourse of a multi-

²⁰ Interview with Alyona, musician, 24, Kazan, 1 October 2017

²¹ Interview with Georgii, teacher, 31, Kazan, 4 May 2018

²² Interview with Darina, musician, 28, Kazan, 2 October 2017

²³ Headline from an article on a 2016 Kremlin project to legally declare a cross-ethnic Russian nation, later abandoned, available at: <https://regnum.ru/news/2200326.html>, accessed 2/1/2023

ethnic Russian people was widely deployed by interviewees, these examples illustrate a repeating emphasis on relations, dialogue and tolerance *between* groups. This suggests that in Kazan, the dilemma between unity and diversity may be settled through an interpretation of the discourse of a multi-ethnic people centred on difference more than unity. Furthermore, although rose-tinted accounts of inter-ethnic relations dominated, they were not universal. Liana, a 32-year-old events manager, said: ‘I’m glad there are lots [of ethnicities] but I don’t have that sense of pride about it... We kind of exist in parallel republics and regions, and each holds on to their own nation.’²⁴ While an outlier among positive judgments of coexistence, this example points again to difference, rather than unity, as the salient point in the multi-ethnic experience.

The narratives discussed in this section contrast with those emphasizing assimilation and homogeneity, as in the interviews with Dawit and Mikhail, noted earlier. Some interviewees dismissed the relevance of diversity. Anton, a 38-year-old Russian electrician, argues: ‘We have actually become so interconnected that dividing us ethnically or otherwise would be truly very difficult... We’re just one people already. Some speak in one language, others speak partially in another, but with that we all speak Russian.’²⁵ Diverging narrative paths through the dilemma between Russia’s national unity and diversity point to a polarization in ethnic politics that is masked by the popular reproduction of the discourse of multi-ethnic peoplehood.

Unity in diversity as a regional feature

In a number of cases, narratives of a positive culture of unity in diversity were associated with Tatarstan rather than Russia. Tolerance and mutual exchange between groups, constructed as factors of pride and belonging, distinguished a sense of local place from the wider national context. Anton, (above) recounts:

When they started actively celebrating the holiday [Uraza Bayram] in Moscow, an acquaintance asked ‘How do you live with them? The yelling in the mosques, slaughtering lambs...’ But what’s the problem? Pop in and see them in the mosque, wish them a Happy Holiday, and they’ll wish you a Happy Holiday and treat you to some lamb. Muslims send us best wishes on Easter, we do them same for them on Uraza Bayram. We coexist perfectly well.²⁶

²⁴ Interview with Liana, events manager, 32, Kazan, 3 October 2017

²⁵ Interview with Anton, electrician, 35, Kazan, 28 April 2018

²⁶ Interview with Anton, electrician, 35, Kazan, 28 April 2018

Anton conveys a sense of patriotic unity overriding differences in religious practice. But for some, the regional specificity of lived diversity impacted on the scaling of the space understood as the motherland. They attributed a sense of comfort and belonging specifically to Tatarstan, while Russia beyond the region evoked feelings of distance linked to its homogeneity.

I feel comfortable because I was brought up here. My norms, traditions, culture, language - they're all here. I soaked it all up so well. It's not just Tatar culture, it's a poly-culture: Russians, Tatars... I feel really great here. So, I know that if I moved to Russia, to another part of Russia, maybe I'd have to get used to it. (Alsu, Tatar, PhD student, 25)²⁷

I feel that Tatarstan is my motherland. To me it's really different, for example, even from Moscow. When I go to Moscow - and I go there often because my husband's older children live there and we go often, or for other reasons I go - There, it seems to me more Russian, that Russian-ness is more pronounced. Here, there is a specific flavour, in Tatarstan, because here you have an intertwining of Asian, Eastern and European cultures. That mix of styles feels very dear to me. (Tamara, Jewish, psychologist, 46)²⁸

Attachment to a regional everyday environment of cultural mixing can thus interfere with the 'banalization' of the Russian nation, such as to evoke feelings of foreignness in places that are 'more Russian' (Billig 1995). Another interviewee, Rezeda, a 28-year-old Tatar sales officer, explains her feelings of distance from Russia as resulting from ethnic prejudice. Speaking about the meaning of 'homeland', she says:

Based on the feeling of how people relate to me, it's Tatarstan. Because in Russia there's already a different attitude. I feel uncomfortable.... As you know, we are a multinational republic. But in Russia there is a kind of particular attitude to Tatars... I was thinking about this myself recently. Where is my home?²⁹

In Rezeda's account, coexistence between ethnicities outside of the Republic appears troubled, and this presents a barrier to minorities in identifying with Russia. While not directly invoking ethnic politics, Rezeda reopens the dilemma between unity and diversity, and judges it to be unresolved and precariously held. Even when the ideal of unity in diversity is shared, it is not necessarily reflected in people's experiences of everyday life. For minorities, Russia can be an unwelcome space, in which Kazan's local harmony is the exception, rather than the rule.

²⁷ Interview with Alsu, PhD student, 25, Kazan, 19 April 2018

²⁸ Interview with Tamara, psychologist, 46, Kazan, 25 April 2018

²⁹ Interview with Rezeda, sales officer, 28, Kazan, 30 September 2017

Lived experiences and hearsay about encounters with difference that proceed differently in Kazan from elsewhere in Russia can thus work against the official discourse of Russia as a multi-ethnic people. This is particularly significant in light of the historical strength of regional identities in many parts of Russia (Clowes Erbslöh & Kokobobo 2018). Here, the region presents an alternative target of belonging with which to link the resonant ideal of unity in diversity. This need not automatically undermine nation-building, since belonging to place is experienced on multiple scales, encapsulated in the meanings of *rodina* (motherland) (Jašina-Schäfer 2019b). Indeed, localism can fuel national identity when a locale is understood to be intertwined with the nation (Kaufmann 2017). The Soviet concept of *malaya rodina* (small motherland) holds continuing resonance in Russia, nesting place-based identity within belonging to Russia (Le Huérou 2015). In Tatarstan, local elites have toed the federal line by constructing peaceful coexistence within the region as the embodiment of multi-ethnic Russia, and a basis for patriotism (Wilmers 2022b). However, the examples above illustrate a different outcome when feelings of inclusion are regionally bounded. As Antonsich (2016) finds in Italy, the banal ‘here’ as a place of belonging only sometimes indicates the nation-state in vernacular talk. In Kazan, markers of the nation suggested in official discourse likewise are only sometimes reproduced as *national* markers of belonging.

Conclusion

Russia joins many other multi-ethnic states in exploiting a discourse that claims a balance between unity and diversity as inherent to the nation. To date, this discourse has been analysed as part of a shifting repertoire deployed to maintain the support of different constituencies for the regime (Laine 2020; Aksiumov & Avksentev 2022; Blakkisrud 2022). There has been little attention to the multi-dimensional diversity of the Russian public, and its effects on uptake of official discourse (Yusupova 2022a). However, as the war in Ukraine progresses, debate is emerging as to its eventual impact on the Kremlin’s ability to maintain tight control over Russia’s regions, particularly ethnic republics (Etkind 2022; Greene 2022). The war has brought new sources of contention to the Kremlin’s balancing of national unity and minority protections. These include the disproportionate numbers of Russians belonging to an ethnic minority dying on the frontlines, and the incompatibility of imperialist and ethno-nationalist discourses, intensified in justifying the war, with the cultural rights of non-Russian citizens.

This article brings much-needed attention to bottom-up engagement with the discourse of multi-ethnic peoplehood, following the premise that the interaction of local and national registers can elucidate how people narrate and practise ‘living in diversity’ (Antonsich 2018a). The spotlight on ordinary people also exposes the micro-level

dynamics crucial to nation-building, rooted in individuals' active negotiation of top-down discourses (Polese *et al.* 2018). The findings highlight weaknesses in the nation-building impact of this discourse in one of the communities in which it is most relevant. In Kazan, the idea of multi-ethnic peoplehood is comfortably linked to experience of positive relations across ethnic divides, offering a local referent for the wider Russian nation. In this sense, the discourse presents a meaning of the nation with the potential to be easily adopted in diverse locales, and horizontally diffused through the micro-level practices of everyday nationalism that reproduce the nation (Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008). However, here, the discourse is often partially adopted or reinterpreted in ways that undermine the primacy of Russian nationhood. Personal encounters with ethnic and religious discrimination, policies exacerbating loss of minority languages, and grassroots resistance to these motivate alternative interpretations of the relationship between national unity and diversity. For people living in communities where recent tensions have reverberated strongly, and especially those identifying with a non-Russian ethnicity, unity in diversity is not necessarily experienced as the Russia-wide national attribute claimed in federal discourse. In these conditions, everyday practices that could support a sense of multi-ethnic peoplehood can underpin its disavowal. The potential rifts in public engagement with discourses underpinning Russian nationalism suggested here deserves further investigation. Political alienation in minority republics can turn regional identity from a building block of Russian identity to an alternative to it. Amid the new pressures brought by the war, bottom-up challenges to the coherence of the multi-ethnic peoplehood discourse suggest obstacles that both regional and ethnic politics may pose to the federal centre in securing Russian national identity going forward.

At present, repression of freedom of speech in Russia is at a height (Aitkhozhina 2022). It is helpful in this context to take stock of the dilemmatic processes through which people make use of nationalist messaging. Ideological talk may include passive regurgitation, but importantly, is not limited to this (Billig *et al.* 1988). Through conscious, intersubjective narrative processes, individuals reformulate nationalist principles and discourses, within the constraints of social acceptability. These processes are important because they complicate nation-building from the bottom up, contributing to its non-linear nature. Amid the further shifts towards authoritarianism that have taken place since the interviews were conducted, quiet alienation among Russia's minorities has not disappeared, and is likely only growing (Yusupova 2022b). Attention to national discourse at different scales can offer insight into fault-lines in Russian nation-building with unequal implications geographically, and along ethnic, gender, class and other dimensions. While polls following the annexation of Crimea suggested that ethnic minorities were not alienated by Russia's imperialist

policy moves (Alexseev 2016, p. 186), this line of inquiry is worth revisiting. Further topics for exploration include a comparison between engagement with the discourse of a multi-ethnic people across regions and among non-Russians as compared with Russians, and the evolution of this over time.

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