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The 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine as an Identity Project

Disentangling the Roots and Dynamics of Russia's Long War over Post-Soviet Identity

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Abstract

In this paper we will devote our attention to the evolution of the narratives promoted by the Russian Federation around the Russian identity in post-Soviet times, focusing on their impact on the other former Soviet republics. Here we will move from an ideational dimension to concrete policy-making: in particular, our attention will go to the legal dimension of Russian identity-building. By reviewing legal acts and programmatic documents adopted by the Russian state over the last decades, we will identify the unfolding "normativization" of the identity project in post-Soviet Russia and its implications for Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. As we will see in the final section of the paper, the case of 2022 Russia's military invasion of Ukraine shows how the initial ideational dimension can evolve into concrete policies, such as the process of "passportization," which unfolded in 2014-2022, making ethnic Russians and/or Russian speakers abroad again part of a legally-binding community of Russian citizens under the control of the Russian state.

Keywords: War in Ukraine; Russian Federation; Russian diaspora; Passportization; Near Abroad.

Introduction[1]

The controversial events that brought to the contested annexation of the self-proclaimed Donets'k and Luhans'k People's Republics and the Ukrainian regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia to the Russian Federation in September 2022 have been followed by an intense discursive process enacted by Russian officials around the shape of national identity. The ceremony for signing the treaties on the accession of the four regions to the Russian Federation, which took place on September 30 in the Grand Kremlin Palace's St. George Hall, was the opportunity for Vladimir Putin (Prezident Rossii, 2022b) to formalize the restored "unity" (edinstvo) – built on a "common destiny and thousand-year history" (obshchaia sudba i tysiacheletniaia istoriia) – after the "tragedy of the collapse of the Soviet Union"

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(posle tragedii raspada Sovetskogo Soiusa), whereby "millions of people" – who, "by their culture, faith, traditions, and language, consider themselves part of Russia" – showed their determination "to return to their true, historical Fatherland" (v svoe podlinnoe, istoricheskoe Otechestvo). As a result of the so-called referendums on joining Russia in the occupied territories of Ukraine – which took place even if Russia did not have complete control of the respective administrative borders of the four Ukrainian regions, the annexation was thus certainly aimed to legitimize the progress of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, but also to crystallize the shaping of a new identity project for Russia. In a similar vein, as Marlene Laruelle (2022) highlighted, this war could be meant both as "a strategic conflict with the West to reshape the post-Cold War European order *and* an identity project for Russia". Most fundamentally, whereby "the strategic aspect has been well studied, the second roots of the war are more complex because the Kremlin has produced multiple ideological narratives on Russia's nation building" (Laruelle, 2022): thus, a long-term perspective seems more suitable to understand the current war as the result of the "progressive reinvention of the country's political and territorial identity".

In this paper, we will devote our attention to the evolution of the narratives promoted by the Russian Federation around the "Russian identity" in post-Soviet times, focusing on their impact on the other former Soviet republics and moving from an ideational dimension to concrete policy-making. In particular, our focus will be on the crystallization of the idea conveyed by the Russian political elite around the reunification of "historical Russia" – in territorial and spatial terms – passing through the reunification of its "people" – in societal and humanitarian terms. Looking at the development of policies relating to "compatriots" (sootechestvenniki) and the "Russian world" (Russkii mir) between the late nineties and the 2000s, we will be able to identify the gradual transition of these rhetorical and ideational constructs to a "normative" level. Here our attention will go precisely to the legal dimension of Russian identity-building: i.e., by reviewing legal acts and programmatic documents adopted by the Russian state over the last decades, we will identify the unfolding "normativization" of the identity project in post-Soviet Russia, and its implications for Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. As we will see in the final section of the paper, the case of the 2022 military invasion of Ukraine shows how the initial ideational dimension can evolve into concrete policies, such as the process of "passportization," which unfolded in 2014-2022, making ethnic Russians and/or Russian speakers abroad again part of a legally-binding community of Russian citizens under the control of the Russian state.

The Internal, External and Legal Dimensions of National Identity: the "Russian Nation", the "Russian Diaspora" and the "Russian Citizens"

The identity project advanced by Russian officials in support of the ongoing war in Ukraine has a long history and goes far beyond the dynamics of the current political crisis: it can be better understood as an attempt to shape a definitive answer to "the multiple challenges to Russia's post-Soviet identity" (Kazharski, 2019, p. 71) that have emerged during the last three decades. According to Aliaksei Kazharski's categorization, these challenges, or "lines of fragmentation", run along several spheres of the Russian post-Soviet experience, which can be summarized as follows:

> The territorial line of fragmentation refers to the discrepancies between the current, legally defined borders of the Russian Federation and the persisting 'geopolitical imaginaries' that are inspired by notions of a greater territorial past, reflected in concepts such as 'historical Russia.' The societal or humanitarian line of fragmentation refers to a sense of having lost large numbers of kin population now resident in the 'near' or even 'far' abroad. This is reflected in notions such as 'divided people.' The historical line of fragmentation refers to ruptures in ideological

> foundations of state-building projects which correspond to different periods of Russian history. Finally, the ethnocultural line of fragmentation refers to challenges of contemporary Russian federalism that has had only limited success in coping with national tensions inside Russia proper. (Kazharski, 2019, pp. 72-73)

The pressing need for a response to the challenges to national identity has been viewed as a priority for political and intellectual elites in Russia since the collapse of the USSR (Tolz, 2004, pp. 177-178). Nonetheless, the same elites have often been divided over the process of reinventing the country's political identity. In her 2011 study on Russian nation-building, Oxana Shevel came to identify five main nation-building projects "reflecting the dominant ways of imagining the 'true' Russian nation" (Shevel, 2011, p. 179), which she classified as follows: a) the nation defined by the territory of the existing state; b) the nation as ethnic Russians; c) an Eastern Slavic nation; d) a Russian-speaking nation; e) a nation defined by the territory of the former USSR. Over the course of Russia's post-Soviet history, the internal division over the plural definitions of the Russian nation – each having its own promoters and following a "civic" or "ethnic" understanding of Russian identity alternatively – has gradually resulted in the contradictory nation-building agendas advanced by Russian officials in recent decades, whereby "all five definitions of the Russian nation are problematic" in terms of "potential irredentism and consequences for Russia's territorial integrity", thus "making their adoption in state policy difficult" (Shevel, 2011, p. 267). It is no surprise that still in 2017 Marlene Laruelle (2017) referred to Russian nation-building as a "balancing game" in the domestic ideological market. In a similar vein, Helge Blakkisrud (2016, p. 267) highlighted how even during Putin's third term (2012-2018) "the Kremlin's response [...] has been to deliberately blur the boundaries between the civic rossiiskii and the ethnic russkii identities", thus "holding up the Russian language, culture and traditional values as the core of this identity".

Undoubtedly, among the lines of fragmentation mentioned by Kazharskii, the societal or humanitarian one has recently embodied a central role in structuring the current narrative around the war in Ukraine, whereby since 2014 – after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas – Russian officials "made finely honed references to the divided nature of the Russian nation and Russia's legitimate moral duty to take care of Russian communities outside Russia and to respect their supposed desire to rejoin the motherland" (Laruelle, 2015a, p. 88). Such a turn is the result of the progressive blurring of the different ideational dimensions of the Russian nation, paradoxically moving the debate over Russian national identity *beyond* the territorial borders of the Russian Federation: the Russian-speaking "diaspora" thus became an integral part of this evolving pattern of Russian identities (and their use for political ambitions).

Following these lines, it is necessary to clarify the peculiar position of the "external dimension" of the Russian national identity, by making a clear reference to the kind of "diasporic community" constructed by the Russian authorities in recent decades. Rather than describing the latter as an entity, we should focus on its role in articulating a response to the multiple challenges to Russia's post-Soviet identity. By using the term diaspora, here we refer thus to "a category of practice", which "is used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, to appeal to loyalties" (Brubaker, 2005, p. 12). Borrowing Brubaker's definition, we deal with a category "with a strong normative change", which "does not so much describe the world as seek to remake it". This definition fits well the urgency of Russian political and intellectual elites, while witnessing the disintegration of the territorial boundaries of the Soviet state. As Valery Tishkov retraces:

> After the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the problem of the diaspora evolved quickly, when it was transformed into a political and even a

> humanitarian challenge. Unlike the earlier diaspora, most of this new community had not emigrated from Russia, but rather were displaced from Russia because international borders had shifted and the Russian state had shrunked. (Tishkov, 2008, p. 3)

Thus, when using the term "Russian diaspora", we should refer to a discourse emerging in the Russian political and intellectual debate around the societal impact of the "migration of borders" (Jašina-Schäfer, 2021, p. 1) following the political transition from Soviet to post-Soviet times: a process turning Russian speakers "into minorities with disputed membership". On the one hand, Brubaker (2000, pp. 1-2) described such an imagined community as an "accidental diaspora" determined "by the movement of borders across people", which "might better be characterized as post-multinational" – rather than post-national, since it occurred as a result of the disintegration of a previously multinational political structure. On the other, in their 2018 study on the Russian-speaking populations residing in the other fourteen states emerging from the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ammon Cheskin and Angela Kachuyevsky (2018, pp. 18-19) highlighted how "it is hardly possible to talk of a unified diaspora in the post-Soviet space", since "the disparate internal conditions of each separate state lead to a wide range of possible reactions to Russia's diasporising policies". Mikhail Suslov goes even further in the introductory section of his 2017 study on Russia's policy towards its diaspora, by claiming that we cannot even describe the latter as "Russian":

> [...] the Russian diaspora is not a diaspora in the strict sense, and nor is it 'Russian'. This 'Russian diaspora' is in fact a post-Soviet diaspora, its homeland no longer in existence. So, when today's Russia, which is a nation-state of Russians, tries to appropriate this effectively non-Russian diaspora, it creates tensions, ironies and confusions. (Suslov, 2017, p. 10).

Yet, in the decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the "lack of a fixed definition of the diaspora" provided the Kremlin with several opportunities to constantly reshape it according to the specific goals to be achieved. Nonetheless, an emerging paradox for the Russian elite has been the one of dealing with "the political subjectivity of the Russian diaspora": as Suslov (2017, pp. 9-10) highlights, "in order to achieve the desired level of political mobilization, a diaspora must have a political project, but because Russian elites (reasonably) fear losing control over this project by giving a voice to those disloyal to Kremlin, a true political project is not present". This controversial situation has eventually given rise to the need for a gradual convergence between the "Russian diaspora" and "Russian citizens", first in an ideational dimension and then in concrete terms of policy-making, in order to guarantee a tighter control of the state over the inherent diversity of Russianness and to use the latter as a foreign-policy tool.

Unsurprisingly, as Shevel could observe still in 2011, it is within the ideational framework of the Russian diaspora where "the vexing nature of Russia's nation-building dilemma may have found a surprising legal solution" (Shevel, 2011, p. 179). A thorough reading of the legal dimension of Russian nation-building sanctioned by the act on "compatriots" (sootechestvenniki) – primarily addressing former Soviet citizens residing in the newly-independent states – and the citizenship laws in 1991 and 2002, invites us to reconsider how an "in-depth look at the politics of Russian policy-making about citizenship can shed light on the larger process of nation-building in Russia" (Shevel, 2012, p. 113).[2] As we will read in

[2] As Shevel (2012, p. 111) points out in her study on citizenship policy in post-Soviet Russia: "Citizenship laws of all states define what can be called the 'official' nation of a given state – the group officially recognized as 'us' rather than 'other' by the state. This group consists of those included in the original body of citizens when

the next section, an exemplary case is the 1999 compatriots' law, which came as an initial response to the long debate over the nature of the societal and humanitarian line of fragmentation challenging Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the long term, it paradoxically did not "not solve the contradictions associated with each of the nation-building agendas", but instead legalized "the ambiguity on the question of the nation's boundaries" (Shevel, 2011, p. 179). At the same time, while on the one hand it guaranteed "the government a way out" of "Russia's nation-building dilemma" (Shevel, 2012, p. 140), on the other today it allows the government "to pursue a broad range of policies in the name of compatriots and admit into the body of the official nation only those whom it sees as desirable" (Shevel, 2012, p. 142). Through the analysis of the legal dimension sanctioning the belonging of the "desirable members" of the "diaspora" to the "Russian nation" we may thus witness how the hybridization of the ideational and normative features of the political language in Russia comes to take shape (and, eventually, to be institutionalized) as an instrument for exerting, on the one hand, state's control over domestic nation-building and, on the other, influence over the contested "near abroad".

From an Ideational Dimension to Policy-Making: The Making of Russians (Beyond Russia)

In order to understand the crucial role played by the "external" dimension of Russian identity in post-Soviet times, we may retrace the evolution of the categorization of the Russian diaspora in the domestic political debate since the early 1990s. As we will see, the result of the evolving pattern of state narratives over "Russians abroad" mainly responded to the need for balancing and appropriating the diverse stances that had already been advanced by the different actors involved in the domestic political struggle.

In the early 1990s, a contested debate over Russian foreign policy in the Near Abroad was at the core of the tensions between the Presidential administration under Boris Eltsin and the Parliament. This dynamic highly impacted on the roots of the Russian strategic vision of its diaspora, making the "societal or humanitarian" line of fragmentation a true bone of contention in the newly-born Russian Federation. As Suslov retraces as part of the first phase of Russia's Diaspora Policy (1991-1997):

> [...] in the beginning, the vision of diaspora was couched in the oppositional to President Yeltsyn right-left revanchists, who dreamt about the restoration of the Soviet Union and consequently constructed the category of 'compatriots abroad' in the inclusive imperial way, with the view of using the victimized Russians in the 'near abroad' as a means to anesthetize the trauma of the disintegration of the country. (Suslov, 2017, p.17)

Even the first ideal (and, later, normative) definition of the diaspora in the Russian political debate reflected a privileged interest in the role of the so-called "compatriots" (sootechestvenniki) in the Near Abroad. Interestingly enough, at the time this claim was not advanced by the presidential administration, but by an oppositional political movement emerged right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in late 1991: the Congress of Russian Communities (KRO), under the leadership of Dmitrii Rogozin. Going back to the main ideas advanced by the KRO in the manifesto issued in 1994, it is possible to highlight the "distinctive voice" of the movement:

> [...] today, in spite of the political borders which have cut up the country, the existence of the Russian nation [russkaia natsiia], connected by a unity of culture, historic past and historic mission, has not ceased [...] WE WERE A UNITED NATION AND WE SHALL

citizenship law was first adopted plus those entitled to simplified access to citizenship without having to fulfill naturalization requirements".

> RETURN TO NATIONAL UNITY.[3] Only having overcome the division of the Russian nation [russkaia natsiia] it is possible to restore civil dignity to millions of people, to revive Russia and save her priceless culture from annihilation […] We are all Russians [russkie] to the extent that we accept Russian [russkaia] culture, feel the link with Russian [russkaia] history and realise responsibility for the future of Russia. (Savelev et al., 1994, p. 11)

As Laruelle (2015b, p. 7) highlighted, the movement "called for protecting Russian minorities and, if possible, for modifying borders in order to integrate Belarus, Transnistria, at least part of Ukraine, and northern Kazakhstan into the Russian Federation". While these geopolitical ambitions remained quite unique, at the time KRO's general position in support of Russian minorities came to be widely shared by other factions in the Parliament, and resulted in the approval of the first Declaration on the support of the Russian Diaspora and the Protection of Russian Compatriots abroad, and the establishment of the Council of Compatriots, by the State Duma in 1995. The document differentiated between the diaspora per se and the compatriots, whereby the latter were described as follows: "[…] any person who is a native of the USSR and Russia or his direct descendant, but who is not a citizen of the Russian Federation" (Gosudarstvennaia Duma, 1996). This early articulation of "compatriots" reflected the nature of the first Citizenship Law in Russia, approved still in the late-Soviet era in 1991, which "defined the 'official' Russian nation as all Soviet citizens by making them eligible for Russian citizenship either automatically or through a simple declaration" (Shevel, 2012, p. 120): at the time, as Shevel retraces in her 2012 study, the "Russian citizenship politics […] can be characterized as informed by both national identity considerations and practical concerns", since the law reflected an "understanding of the nation and the state prevalent at the time" and the late-Soviet Russian "hope that some form of union state could be preserved" out of the decaying USSR (Shevel, 2012, pp. 122-123). Only later, the 1993 amendment to the citizenship law, which sanctioned that former Soviet citizens were not required to renounce their prior citizenship before acquiring the Russian one, made Russian authorities push for "dual citizenship" as the ground for future political integration in the post-Soviet space.[4] The specific reference to the new territorial configuration after the fall of the USSR as the primary marker of the identity of the compatriots in the 1995 declaration came then to be further remodulated in the contested political climate in the late 1990s, whereby the approval of the first law "On the State Policy in Relation to Compatriots Abroad" in 1999 already embodied a wider cohort, and reflected the "voluntaristic" dimension supported by KRO:

> Compatriots abroad (hereinafter referred to as compatriots) are citizens of the Russian Federation permanently residing outside the territory of the Russian Federation […] Are also recognized as compatriots individuals and their descendants who live outside the territory of the Russian Federation and who, as a rule, belong to the peoples historically living on the territory of the Russian Federation, and who have made a free choice in favor of spiritual, cultural and legal ties with the Russian Federation […]. (Federalnyi Zakon, 1999)

The law reflected the tumultuous experience of the political debate in the 1990s, giving birth to an "inclusive" legal definition of compatriots, reflecting interests that go even

[3] Emphasis in original.

[4] Along these lines, the compatriots' legal paradigm started to be developed in parallel to the strategy of dual citizenship, which was harshly opposed by the other post-Soviet states, and reflected not only a renewed ambition for regional integration, but also a practical concern for the fate of Russians in the former Soviet republics and the threat of their massive migration flow to the Russian Federation (see Shevel, 2012, pp. 123-124).

beyond the post-Soviet region and reach the so-called "Global Russians" residing in the West.[5] Only after Putin's rise to power in 2000 did the presidential administration reappropriate the concept for the sake of a global strategy that was still to be developed. It is no surprise that already in August 2001 the President signed the "Concept of Support for Compatriots" (Kontseptsiia, 2001), which included several directions for making the compatriots an integral part of concrete "foreign and domestic policy"-making. Among them, we may mention:

- the use of international mechanisms and procedures for ensuring and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the rights of people belonging to minorities;
- the financial and economic support of Compatriots in the Near Abroad;
- the support for their resettlement to Russia on a voluntary basis or due to emergency circumstances;
- the support for public organizations and associations of compatriots.

A few months later, in October 2001, Vladimir Putin's speech at the First International Congress of Compatriots living abroad would have eventually crystallized the emerging position of the new presidential administration on the territorial and "spiritual" identity of the "Russian-speaking community", making clear their strict link to the Russian state (and the "Russian World"):

> The Russian-speaking community, together with Russian citizens, now ranks fifth in the world. Tens of millions of people who speak, think, and, perhaps, more importantly, feel in Russian, live outside the Russian Federation [...] There has long been a heated debate about who should be considered compatriots. We often try to put what is challenging to measure and explain in words into legal formulas. This probably needs to be done. However, compatriots are not only a legal category. And even more so, it's not a question of status or any benefits. This is primarily a matter of personal choice. A question of self-determination. I would say even more precisely, spiritual self-determination. This path is not always easy. After all, the concept of the "Russian world" from time immemorial went far beyond the geographical borders of Russia and even far beyond the boundaries of the Russian ethnic group. (Vsemirnyi koordinatsionnyi sovet, 2001)

The overlapping between the policy of "compatriots" and the idea of the "Russian world" is not accidental in this speech by Putin from 2001, and can only be understood by looking at the philosophical and conceptual work developed by those figures who worked close to Eltsin's political establishment in the second half of the nineties, and in particular the so-called "polittekhnologi" – political technologists (or, *gumanitarnye technologi* – humanitarian technologists): i.e., a class of intellectuals and consultants of the Russian political elite working on the "professional engineering of politics" in times of electoral campaign or strategic planning regarding domestic or foreign policy (see Wilson 2023). Among these, two figures experiencing mixed fortunes in Putin's political establishment and becoming political advisors to the Russian President – Petr Shchedrovitskii until 2006 and Gleb Pavlovskii until 2011 – are those who in the 1990s gave shape to the repertoire of

[5] For a comprehensive understanding of the concept of Global Russians, see Ageeva and Akopov's definition: "[...] global Russians are individuals who, even while not residing in Russia, identify with Russian civilization, remain immersed in Russian language and cultural environments, and are actively engaged with Russian society. At the same time, their international professional recognition allows them to contribute to cultural, intellectual and economic developments at a global level. Furthermore, Global Russians have the capability and inclination for critical thinking about Russia's social developments" (Ageeva & Akopov, 2022, p.1340).

Russian political discourse around the formation of the so-called idea of the "Russian World".[6]

Already in 1996, Pavlovskii and Shchedrovitskii worked within the so-called Russkii Institute, an autonomous organization founded in March 1996, whose statutory objective was to promote the formation of Russian cultural and social identity. Within a renewed intellectual reflection around the fragmented nature of Russian identity, this first elaboration of the idea of the "Russian world" was aimed "to theorize the community of the Russian speakers on the globe", acknowledging that "today it was the Russian diaspora, which became more important than core Russia, because the diaspora was better adapted to globalization" (Suslov, 2018, p. 335), thus radically revising the center-periphery relations in the traditional imperial and Soviet understanding. In his 1999 essay titled 'Russkii Mir i transnatsionalnoe russkoe' (The Russian World and the Transnational Russianness), Shchedrovitskii could define the centrality of the Russian world (and the Russian diaspora) within the new geopolitical framework:

> During the 20th century, under the influence of enormous historical changes, world wars and revolutions around the globe, the Russian world emerged as a networked structure of large and small communities that think and speak Russian. It is no secret that barely half of the population of the Russian world lives on the territory delimited by the administrative borders of the Russian Federation. (Shchedrovitskii, 1999)

This original framing of the Russian World had nothing to do with the spatial or territorial dimension, but had a humanitarian value, promoting an alternative de-territorialized and decentered imagery of the global Russian-speaking community as a network of partnerships, where "this is the diaspora, which is invited to exert influence on core Russia, not the reverse" (Suslov, 2018, p. 336). Only the appropriation of the concept by state actors in the early 2000s will then revert the balance of powers between the "core Russia" – i.e., the Russian state – and the "Russian diaspora", creating a newly-territorialized understanding of the concept, where the Russian world is depicted "as a kind of the solar system, revolving around its only centre of gravity – the Russian Federation" (Suslov, 2018, p. 338). In this new normative understanding, the Russian world becomes "a geopolitical entity", which "is now defined as a monolithic body of the Russian people, Russian state, Russian lands, Russian culture and Russian values" (Suslov, 2018, p. 344), thus answering and intersecting the territorial and societal-humanitarian lines of fragmentation of Russia's post-Soviet identity.

As Suslov highlights in his 2017 study, in the early stage of diaspora policies the fluidity of the ideal dimension of the Russian diaspora as being conceptualized by Russian officials eventually came to determine the lack of clear strategy and structure for the concrete actions of the Kremlin in terms of policy-making. It was only in the 2000s that the gradual convergence of categories such as the Soviet legacy, Russian language and Russian ethnicity created a target group for national policy-making that made the so-called Russians in the near abroad become "the main object of the Kremlin's policies of instrumentalizing diaspora", such as "passportization, repatriation and irredentism" (Suslov, 2017, p. 12). As Aliaksei Kazharski highlighted in his 2019 study, indeed, also "spatial constructs of 'great' or 'historical' Russia have been activated in discourses on the Russian 'near abroad'", whereby Russian political discourse gradually "framed post-Soviet integration as the task of

[6] As Suslov retraces in his study dedicated to the prehistory of the concept: "The authorship of the 'Russian world' is contested among several intellectuals including Gleb Pavlovskii, Petr Shchedrovitskii and Iurii Krupnov. In fact, they all belong to the same mildly conservative network of intellectuals, whose most important 'nodes' could be found in the group of 'methodologists' [...], Foundation for the Effective Politics, and the circle of 'new conservatives' [...]" (Suslov, 2018, p. 334).

'gathering lands' as opposed to giving them away (sobirat', a ne razdavat' zemli) and 'restoring historical Russia in its historical borders'" (Kazharski, 2019, p. 77).

Within this evolution of Russian diaspora policies, Ukraine played again a crucial role: the "Orange Revolution" taking shape in Kyiv in 2004 and distancing Ukraine from the Russian-led integration process influenced the "Kremlin's perception that it was defeated in its neighborhood" (Laruelle, 2015b, p. 10), and only then "Russia's compatriot policy became increasingly reinterpreted to suppress the elements of partnership while highlighting its confrontational element as Russia's soft-power instrument in its struggle with the West" (Suslov, 2017, p. 24).

The institutionalization and systematization of diaspora policies occurred through the creation of new bodies, such as the Russkii Mir Foundation in 2007 and the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo) in 2008. The former was the final result of the alternative identity project elaborated by the Presidential Administration in the early 2000s, aiming to shape a new framework for Russia's public diplomacy not only in the Near Abroad, but also in the West (see Laruelle, 2015b). As Lara Ryazanova-Clarke retraces in her 2014 study, the aim of this new institution:

> is to create a new space for a Russian-speaking identity, a network that aspires to integrate Russian 'compatriots' [...] who live outside the mainland, along with a broader range of those who are 'interested in Russia' and 'are concerned about its future'" (Ryazanova-Clarke 2014, pp. 249-250).

On the other hand, Rossotrudnichestvo was established as a new federal agency with the role of promoting "cultural diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, and cooperation with compatriots, which is unparalleled with any Western cultural diplomacy institutions but remain characteristic for the Russian understanding of 'international humanitarian cooperation'" (Koval, Tereshchenko 2023, p. 14).

Differently from the Russkii Mir Foundation, Rossotrudnichestvo was the result of the revamping of the RoszarubezhTsentr (Russian Center for International Science and Culture Cooperation under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), which had been founded in 1994 to foster relations of Russia with foreign countries. As Koval et al. (2023, p. 32) retrace in their study on Russian cultural diplomacy under Putin, the Decree establishing the new federal agency came "less than a month after Russia's troops invaded the territory of Georgia", as a result of "Russia's realization that it needed to reconsider its approach to the use of soft power and re-evaluate its weight in light of the 2003-2004 colour revolutions in Eastern Europe and the deterioration of attitudes towards Russia in the aftermath of its 2008 attack on Georgia". The same year, an amendment to the new 2002 Citizenship law – which will be discussed in the following section – extended the right to facilitated access to Russian citizenship to the participants in the "compatriots resettlement program", which had been launched in 2007. Later, in 2010 the 1999 compatriots' law was also amended, and further blurred the boundaries of the compatriots group: now it was "not to limit the 'compatriots' designation to 'peoples which have traditionally lived on the territory of the Russian Federation", but was there "to extend it to 'Russians and Russian-speakers and representatives of other nationalities living in states of the far and near abroad'" (Shevel, 2011, p. 195).

From Geopolitics to Biopolitics: Passportization and the Defence of Russian Citizens in the Near Abroad

It should be no surprise that among the new strategic goals of the 2008 Foreign Policy concept approved by then President Dmitrii Medvedev the Russian diaspora came to be mentioned as being an integral part of a broader foreign-policy strategy:

> […] to protect the rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots living abroad, on the basis of international law and existing bilateral agreements, considering the multi-million Russian diaspora – the Russian World – as a partner, also in expanding and strengthening the space of Russian language and culture […]. (Kontseptsiia vneshnei politiki, 2008)

Most importantly, the reformulation of diaspora policies made their role crucial in creating the ground for the future direct involvement of the Kremlin in the domestic affairs of the states in the Near Abroad: namely, the liberalization of citizenship policies, together with peacekeeping operations, in territorial conflicts, shaped the so-called practices of "passportization", whereby the Russian Federation could now have the right to intervene in defence of the Russian citizens in the region according to international law. Also in this case, as Laruelle highlights, we witnessed the gradual legitimization of stances that had already emerged in the 1990s, as being advocated by the KRO, first, and then Rodina, the party formation of the former KRO leader Dmitrii Rogozin[7] in the early 2000s:

> Whereas the KRO–Rodina network advocated that Russia should grant compatriots a legal status enabling their defense manu militari, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Duma have always emphasized the state's inability to defend people who are not legally citizens of the Russian Federation–that is, until the Ukraine crisis of 2014. (Laruelle, 2015a, p. 93).

Indeed, already in 2008, the defense of Russian citizens in South Ossetia was advanced as the main justification for the Russian military intervention in Georgia, whereby the so-called passportization policies promoted by the Russian Federation since the early 2000s created a situation where "more than 90 per cent of the residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia had obtained Russian citizenship before the 2008 war" (Nagashima, 2019, p. 186). Interestingly enough, the then President of the Russian Federation, Dmitrii Medvedev, in his statement on the situation in South Ossetia clearly referred to the national interest of the Russian Federation, mentioning the need for protecting "Russian citizens" abroad:

> Civilians, women, children, and older people are dying today in South Ossetia, and the majority of them are citizens of the Russian Federation. In accordance with the Constitution and the federal laws, as President of the Russian Federation it is my duty to protect the lives and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they may be. (Prezident Rossii, 2008)

As Toru Nagashima poses in his study on Russia's passportization policy toward unrecognized republics, passportization acquired "a legal basis" for its development only within the framework of the new citizenship law of the Russian Federation, which was approved in 2002, when again "the conflict between the national idea and the logics of state-building […] was resolved in favor of the state" (Shevel, 2012, p. 127).[8] Till the end of 2000, all the former citizens of the USSR living outside Russia could register to acquire Russian citizenship according to the 1991 citizenship law: the law reflected the common concern of the Russian political elite after the "reduction" of the Soviet territorial borders, and within

[7] It is no surprise that in the Putin era Rogozin himself gradually became a central figure in the country's political establishment: first, as the chairman of the Duma Committee for Foreign Affairs between the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s, then as the Russian ambassador to NATO between 2008 and 2011, and again between 2011 and 2022 as Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and the Space Industry and Director General of Roscosmos. In September 2023, he was appointed aspirational senator by the governor of the Russian-occupied Zaporozhe Oblast.

[8] As Nagashima (2019, p. 189) highlights: "While the old citizenship law of 1992 was based on the idea that the open citizenship policy would foster future political integration in the former Soviet space, the concept of the new citizenship law of 2002 was derived from economic pragmatism and the belief that the 1992 citizenship law imposed an undue economic burden on Russia".

this framework, for example, the KRO was able to help informally residents in Abkhazia to secure Russian citizenship from 1998 to 2001 (Nagashima, 2019, p.188). However, after the approval of the 2002 law, in order to obtain Russian citizenship, former Soviet citizens who were not born within the territory of the Russian Federation had to fulfill the same requirements as other foreign citizens. At the same time, according to Article 14 of the 2002 legal provision, the new law "provided a loophole for residents in the breakaway regions to become Russian citizens in a simplified procedure", exempting them from the five-year residence requirement (Nagashima, 2019, p. 190). Interestingly enough, this article came to be included as part of the new citizenship law as a result of the political pressure made by the communist deputies Anatolii Chekhoev and Viktor Alksnis, advocating for "compatriots' rights", who managed to have their amendment plan to the presidential draft accepted in the final version of the law.

Thus, even if initially "the passportization policy was not embedded in the Kremlin's general policy", it became pretty active in Abkhazia in June 2002 "on an ad hoc basis, considering developments in international relations" (Nagashima, 2019, p. 190).[9] This dynamic made the "passportizazion policy" become a reactive measure in those neighboring political contexts where contestation could arise against the political will of the Kremlin, making it both a valuable foreign-policy instrument and a tool for sustaining new potential identity projects. As Gerard Toal could already highlight in 2017:

> The policy change proved significant because it gave bureaucratic state form to imagined communities of identity and belonging—*russkii* (ethnic Russians), *rossiyanye* ("Russians"), *sootechestvenniki* ("compatriots"), and those within *Russkii Mir* (the "Russian World")—beyond Russia's borders. Geopolitics was more transparently expressing itself as biopolitics (the management of populations). (Toal, 2017, pp. 140-141)

Most fundamentally, the prehistory of the policies implemented by Russia in the 2000s comes to be truly important when addressing the dynamics in Ukraine even long before February 2022, whereby already since 2014 the instrumental use of the legal framework for Russian citizenship in times of territorial conflicts became a widespread practice making only in 2020 "a total of 409,549 people who were previously citizens of Ukraine" become Russian citizens – i.e., "62% of the total number of all those who received a Russian passport" (Gulina, 2021) the same year – thus legitimizing the political goals of the Kremlin.

The Case of Passportization in Ukraine and the Normativization of the Russian Identity Project

A conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been ongoing for more than ten years: i.e., long before it turned out in the form of the full-scale aggression by the Russian Federation that occurred on 24 February 2022. Since 2014, the Ukrainian government and representatives of public organizations on all possible platforms have been rejecting the Kremlin's assertions that a civil war is allegedly going on in Ukraine (International Crisis Group, n.d.). Following the narrative of assistance to the "rebellious Donbass", Russian President Vladimir Putin kept on promising an "adequate response" in the event of an offensive by the Ukrainian army on Donets'k and Luhans'k (Prezident Rossii, 2018). And, according to Putin's address to the Russian citizens on 24 February 2022, the need for a "special military operation" in Ukraine was required in order "to combat Ukrainian fascists and nationalists who crossed their red lines with regard to the Donetsk and Lugansk regions" (Prezident Rossii, 2022c).

[9] The impact became quite relevant in Abkhazia and South Ossetia already few months after the start of passportization: in the former the percentage of Russian citizens grew from 20 to 70 % already in June 2002, while in the latter it reached more than 80% by January 2003.

According to the Kremlin, such a "type of oppression from the Kyiv regime" has led to the emergence of so-called "rebels" on the territories of "Donetsk/Luhansk People's Republics". Actually, as Konstantin Skorkin retraced in a 2023 article emblematically entitled *Who decided on the boundaries of the 'Russian World'? A brief history of Donbas separatism*, the roots of this war should be related to the early 2000s, whereby: "Since the Orange Revolution, in 2004, the Russian authorities have been deliberately pitting the residents of various Ukrainian regions against each other – and the clash has now grown to massive proportions, with enormously bloody consequences" (Skorkin, 2023). This process involved the growth and participation of Kremlin-funded organizations mobilizing the "Russian diaspora" in pursuing Donbas separatism, which have been very active in the region since late 2000s: e.g., the Ukrainian branch of the Russian state-sponsored Institute of Diaspora and Integration (or Institute of CIS countries) established in 1996 in Russia to provide a comprehensive study of socio-political and economic processes in the post-Soviet space, and the problems of Russian compatriots, which was led by the State Duma deputy Konstantin Zatulin – who already in 1994 was appointed as the head of the Duma Committee for the Compatriots abroad (Institut stran SNG, n.d.); or the Russian Center in Luhans'k funded by the Russkii Mir Foundation (Russkii Mir, 2009). In other words, the history of "Donbas separatism is a vivid example of what Putin's 'soft power' can become in the post-Soviet region", whereby the Kremlin was able to use "the local Russian-speaking population as an instrument for meddling in the internal affairs of a neighboring country" (Skorkin, 2023).

The same is true for the dynamics bringing to the rise of the Anti-Maidan movement in Donbas in 2014, whereby the "governance crisis precipitated by the Euromaidan protests created a moment of opportunity for a cross-border network of pro-Russia activists to seize power in Donbas and beyond in southeast Ukraine" (O'Loughlin et al., 2017, p. 125), bringing to the revival of the secessionist imaginary of "Novorossiya",[10] which was described by Laruelle (2018, p. 195) as "a live mythmaking process orchestrated [...] by different Russian nationalist circles" who were not directly linked to the presidential administration – even if "Novorossiya" acquired public legitimacy in the Russian public discourse also thanks to Putin's use of the term in April 2014. At the same time, as O'Loughlin et al. (2017, p. 127) retrace in their historical reconstruction of the "Anti-Maidan movement", "the Kremlin appears to have authorized the Russian security services to use their influence to create territorial governance problems for the new pro-Western Government in Kyiv", by gathering a "plethora of networks", such as former Communist Party members, imperial nationalist groups and financial-economic regional groups, around "their opposition to the new government in Kyiv after February 2014" – i.e., after Viktor Ianukhovych's removal from power.

Nonetheless, during 2014-2022, following the Russian perspective, Ukraine has been fighting with its own people, whereby Ukrainian officials "openly and with impunity call for the murdering of Russian people [russkikh liudei]" (PRRFUN, 2022). At the same time, in 2022 the Kremlin's narrative changed, also as a result of passportization policies. On the occasion of the extraordinary meeting of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, which was convened on February 21, 2022, to discuss the potential recognition of the sovereignty of

[10] The historical term "Novorossiya" describes the Russian province of the Russian Empire created in the territories north of the Black Sea that were conquered after several wars with the Ottoman Empire in the late XVIII century, expanding then as to include the newly-acquired lands around the Azov Sea. As O'Loughlin et al. (2017, p. 125) retrace, in spring 2014, Donbas rebels "posted maps of Novorossiya as comprising eight oblasts of southeast Ukraine", and later the leaders of the self-proclaimed People's Republics of Donets'k and Luhans'k even "announced the creation of Novorossiya as a confederal Union of People's Republic" – but already one year later the project was officially suspended.

Donets'k and Luhans'k People's Republics, Dmitrii Medvedev came back to stress the need for defending "Russian citizens" residing in the territory of the self-proclaimed republics:

> About 800 thousand citizens of the Russian Federation currently live on the territory of these two unrecognized entities. In this case, I mean, Vladimir Vladimirovich, not even the Russian world, which we take care of, help, and support in every possible way, but the citizens of the Russian Federation. Russian Citizens who live in another country. These are our people. I would like to emphasize that here we deal with people who not only speak Russian, but are citizens of our country. (Prezident Rossii, 2022a).

Most fundamentally, the passportization process implemented by the Russian Federation in times of war in Ukraine is an exemplary case of the instrumental use of the evolving pattern of Russian identities, gradually making "compatriots" and/or the "Russian world" in Ukraine again part of a legally-binding community of Russian citizens under the control of the Russian state. Since the beginning of 2014, it is essential to note that, in addition to humanitarian consequences, residents of Non-Government Controlled Areas (NGCAs) of Ukraine have been faced with substantial bureaucratic issues: one of them was to obtain their legal documents from Ukrainian authorities. For example, following the developments of the Spring-Summer 2014, the process of applying for Ukrainian citizenship has seriously deteriorated, especially when it comes to the children who traveled from NGCA or Crimea to Government-controlled areas (GCAs). In order to start with a passport procedure, a person entering the GCA of Ukraine had to deliver supporting documents about his/her age and the age of the child, and to declare at the checkpoint about the need to obtain a passport: i.e., a person was allowed to enter the GCA only after age verification and affiliation by Ukrainian Armed Forces/border guards (Ukrainian State Migration Service). In general, the issue of legal documents of Ukrainian citizens who remained in the territory that has not been under the control of the Government of Ukraine within the boundaries of Donets'k and Luhans'k regions has been and remains quite acute. The presence or absence of a passport is a significant factor affecting the legal status of citizens of Ukraine and the exercise of their rights and freedoms. Moreover, a person who does not have an identity document would be limited in accessing an entire range of services (administrative, social, banking, etc.). In a broader sense, a lack of a passport can lead to cases of statelessness (Dickinson, 2021). This situation has become even more relevant after 24 February 2022.

Undoubtedly, in 2014-2022, the entire discourse about the issuing of legal documents in GCAs of Ukraine has been largely influenced by the series of decrees released by the Government of the Russian Federation in order to ease the process for the acquisition of the Russian passport by specific categories of Ukrainians at the beginning (2014-2018), and eventually for entire Ukraine (since 2018 and onwards). The Russian approach towards a simplified procedure for issuing Russian passports for Ukrainian citizens found its first step already in 2014. On 18 March 2014, the Russian Government released a Decree On the admission of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation (Dogovor, 2014). Article 5 of the Agreement states that "from the date of admission of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation and the formation of new subjects within the Russian Federation, citizens of Ukraine and stateless persons permanently residing on that day on the territory of the Republic of Crimea or on the territory of the federal city of Sevastopol are automatically recognized as citizens of the Russian Federation". Back in 2014, according to the Russian media, it was necessary to bring an application, a national passport of a citizen of Ukraine, including a stamp with the registration of a place of residence on the territory of the Republic of Crimea or the federal city of Sevastopol by March 18, 2014. The process of issuing a new passport lasted, according to the Migration Services of the RF, up to three months from the date of application (Domcheva, 2014). According to Ukrainian authorities,

the Russian passport, which the Russian Federation forcibly issued for citizens of Ukraine in Crimea, should have been taken as a mean to ensure the necessary living conditions for the period of occupation. At the same time, there was no envisaged punishment for having this passport unless a person worked as a civil servant in Ukraine (BBC Ukraina, 2015).

The facilitation of the rights of Ukrainians on the territory of the Russian Federation evolved further in 2018, when the Government of the Russian Federation released the Decree 'On increasing the term of temporary stay in the territory of the Russian Federation of Ukrainian citizens permanently residing in certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine' (i.e., NGCAs of so-called DPR and LPR) (Pravitelstvo RF, 2018). The main objective of this Decree was to increase the continuous period of temporary stay on the territory of the Russian Federation for the citizens of Ukraine up to 180 days from the date of entry into the territory of the Russian Federation. In April 2019, Russian President Putin released another Decree on the simplified procedure for issuing Russian passports for the residents of Donbas (Prezident Rossii, 2019).[11] According to the new Decree, there is an overall need to abide by the principles of international law and to apply a right for admission to the citizenship of Russian Federation in a simplified manner for the citizens of Ukraine who currently reside in certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. A similar approach might be found in a 2014 Decree, when President Putin ordered to consider citizenship applications in a period that would not exceed three months from the moment of document submission (Federalnyi Zakon, 2014). Moreover, both decrees focus on children (youth under 18) and clarify precisely how orphans, in particular, may apply for the acquisition of Russian citizenship. Eventually, since April 24, 2019, citizens of uncontrolled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions also obtained a right for their children to apply for Russian citizenship. It was taking some time for the responsible services of the Russian Federation to decide whether to grant citizenship to the applicants. Documents were issued in the Rostov region in case of a positive decision.[12] Several special posts were deployed there for such a reason (DNR, 2019).

The following important Decree impacting on the procedure for issuing Russian passports dates back to July 24, 2020, when the Federal Law 134 of the Russian Federation on simplifying the procedure for admission to Russian citizenship came into force (Gosudarstvennaia Duma, 2020). According to the mentioned law, starting from July 24, 2020, foreign citizens on the territory of the Russian Federation have been granted a right to apply for Russian citizenship in a simplified manner. It has been advanced to the point that foreigners did not need to denounce their primary citizenship to become Russian citizens. This law aimed to target citizens of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Ukraine who already had a residence permit in the Russian Federation to allow them to apply for citizenship without complying with the conditions on the period of residence. Furthermore, on November 4, 2020, President Putin signed a complementary Decree (No. 665) on the simplified acquisition of citizenship by the residents of the so-called 'DPR' and 'LPR' (Ukaz, 2020). This complementary Decree aimed to ease the procedure of applying for Russian citizenship for the holders of the passports of the so-called 'DPR' and 'LPR'. At that time, the Russian migration service no longer required the passport of Ukraine as a prerequisite for

[11] The decree came to be approved a week after the results of Presidential elections in Ukraine, which saw Volodymyr Zelenskyi winning 73,22% of votes in the second round against his rival Petro Poroshenko. Commenting on the new Ukrainian president's statements on the potential release of Ukrainian passports to Russian citizens subject to political persecution, Vladimir Putin could highlight how if "Russia and Ukraine issue passport to each other's citizens, they will quickly come to a 'common denominator' [...] We will have a common citizenship" (Bulanov, 2019).

[12] Rostov is a Russian region bordering Ukraine. Since 2014, the border crossing point is uncontrolled due to its seizure by the forces of the so-called 'Luhansk and Donetsk People Republics'.

application. The conditionality of possessing only a passport of the so-called 'LPR/DPR' or a residence permit of the Ukrainian NGCAs provided a right to apply for a Russian passport without leaving the areas of Luhansk and Donetsk regions. According to information from Russian authorities in 2019, more than 650 thousand people had already received Russian passports in the Donbas (Roth, 2021). Ukrainian response at that time was not sharp enough, and only a draft law aimed to deprive of Ukrainian citizenship those who have voluntarily applied for the Russian one was submitted to the Ukrainian Parliament by MPs for consideration (Verkhovna Rada, 2021).

The 2022 full-scale invasion only exacerbated the situation with a forced passportization of the occupied territories of Ukraine. Ukrainian citizens who resided in Ukrainian NGCAs at the time of invasion, currently encounter tremendous difficulties in exercising their rights without having a Russian passport. To be more precise, nationals without Russian passports might be deprived of access to healthcare and humanitarian aid, which is available for the 'citizens' of the RF. According to President Putin's most recent Decree, starting from July 1, 2024, residents of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions who do not hold the Russian passport will be considered 'foreigners' or 'stateless' and might be deported to Russia or detained in the detention facilities (Sullivan 2023). Currently, ongoing debates within the Russian political spectrum question whether those who do not hold a Russian passport should be allowed to apply for a residence permit in order to keep their life in one of the above-mentioned regions of Ukraine "annexed" (or occupied, according to Ukrainian authorities) by the RF.

Overall, the policy of passportization in the occupied Ukrainian territories might be compared with the one Russia pursued in Abkhazia (i.e., in the internationally recognized territory of Georgia). However, there are signs of even stricter measures for the 'integration' of the Ukrainians residing in NGCAs, whereby Russian standards (i.e., Russian ruble, Russian passport, and Russian media) seem to be the only alternative for people who turned out to be in the territories of Ukraine controlled by the Russian Government (Durnev, 2021). The lack of a Russian passport or a passport of the so-called 'DPR/LNR' may lead to detention without any justifications. Recently, RF also started to issue individual numbers and medical insurances along the line with Russian passports. Amendments to the labor codex of the so-called 'DPR' are another objective RF aims to implement for even more advanced integration of the controlled territories.

Most fundamentally, moving to the impact of these legal acts on the "core" of the "Russian nation", as Olga Gulina (2021) could highlight already in July 2021: "Contemporary Russia has been adding new citizens who, by virtue of their status and territorial location, represent a particular group of Russian 'subjects' on the territories of unrecognized countries". These new "naturalized Russian citizens [...] have, de iure, all the rights and obligations of Russian nationals": this is true also for their entitlement to vote in elections, as it happened on the occasion of the 2021 Russian parliamentary elections, whereby of "the roughly 200.000 voters, three quarters voted electronically at de facto polling stations (so-called 'information centers on the territory of the 'DPR' and 'LPR'); one quarter travelled to polling stations in the neighboring Rostov region in Russia" (Burkhardt et al. 2022, p.4).

Even if "this direction of Russian migration policy remains a 'stumbling block' in relations with other countries and may become a challenge for Russia in the future", at the same time this approach undoubtedly creates a new normative approach to the new identity project for Russia, moving from the ideational dimension to a new concrete strategy for policy-making. Such a perspective comes to be confirmed by the further developments in the months following the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, whereby the process of passportization was only scaled up. Another important Decree was adopted on 25 May 2022, which aimed primarily to ease the procedure for obtaining Russian

citizenship for residents of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions of Ukraine (Ukaz, 2022a). A few months later, on July 2022, Putin also signed the amendments to the Law of 24 April 2019, regarding the simplified acquisition of Russian citizenship by the nationals of Ukraine, citizens of the so-called 'LPR/DPR', and stateless persons (Ukaz, 2022b): indeed, the amendments expanded the range of action not only to the citizens of so-called 'LPR/DPR' but also to all the citizens of Ukraine.

On the one hand, nowadays, the impact of this process makes it almost impossible to talk about the potential reintegration of Donbas or any other occupied territory under Ukrainian control in the foreseeable future. Apart from the active hostilities on the territory of Ukraine, one of the main challenges consists in the very fact that for Ukrainian officials the presence of Russian passports for a significant part of Ukrainian citizens, regardless of where they live, will be an immense danger to the existence of Ukrainian statehood - in the political, economic and military spheres. And the realities of 2022 have demonstrated it clearly. On the other, the final step towards the normativization of the new Russian identity project came to be included in the legal and programmatic acts approved in late 2022 and early 2023. It is no surprise that the first of these documents to be approved was "The Concept of Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad" (Kontseptsiia gumanitarnoi politiki, 2022), emphasizing the role of Russian culture and identity as one of the main spheres to be advanced in the domain of foreign policy and public diplomacy. Here, among the main goals, "the defence, preservation and continuation of the traditions and ideals pertaining to the Russian World" are clearly stated, whereby the document highlights the gradual convergence between Russian culture and state through the need for "neutralizing anti-Russian attitudes of political-ideological nature".

Later, in the new Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, which was approved in March 2023, while emphasizing Russia's role in fulfilling "the unique mission of maintaining the global balance of power and building a multipolar international system", we witness a new emphasis on the need for securitizing both "the defence of Russian citizens and organizations from foreign illegal encroachments" and the "support of compatriots living abroad", which are included together in the same section among the priorities of Russian foreign policy. In order to counter "the campaign of Russophobia unleashed by unfriendly states", Russia, as being "the core of the civilizational community of the Russian World", is inclined to pay primary attention to its diaspora by:

> "[...] promoting the consolidation of compatriots living abroad who are constructively disposed towards Russia, and providing them with support in the development of their rights and legitimate interests in the states of residence, especially in unfriendly states, their preservation of the all-Russian cultural, linguistic identity and Russian spiritual and moral values, and ties with the historical Motherland" (Kontseptsiia vneshnei politiki, 2023).

Here the reference to "compatriots living abroad who are constructively disposed towards Russia [konstruktivno nastroennykh po otnosheniiu k Rossii sootechestvennikov]" is, by no means, accidental, whereby we think about the number of Russians fleeing Russia after the start of the invasion (and the partial mobilization starting in September 2022) that is constantly growing, thus creating a new Russian diaspora in several foreign countries.[13] In conclusion, the need for securitizing the identity project promoted by the Russian state becomes even more urgent in times of war: and along these lines, it is no surprise that the new Citizenship Law of the Russian Federation (Federalnyi Zakon, 2023), approved in April 2023, includes an extensive number of grounds for the deprivation of citizenship – which

[13] See, for example, the latest report entitled *The Motherland Abroad: The Impact of Russians Fleeing the War*, which was published by the Italian Institute for International Political Studies in November 2023 (ISPI, 2023).

were not present in the 2002 law – that are mostly based on security reasons or actions threatening national security.

Concluding Remarks

As Laruelle (2022) puts it, the discursive process around Russian identity gaining momentum in the Kremlin after the start of the full-scale aggression against Ukraine could be seen not only as an instrument for legitimizing the military intervention in the neighbouring country and its progress, but also as "the most coherent patchwork formulated so far because it is broad enough to encompass many different readings", conflating "state projection abroad, nation-building, regime securitization, and Putin's self-vision as a ruler whose historical role in bringing back power and dignity, as well as lost territories, will not be questioned by future leadership". Within this framework, we may understand not only how "identity issues" shape the current war on Ukraine, but at the same time how the current war on Ukraine is also reshaping the identity project in Russia: the contradictory challenges to Russia's post-Soviet identity, or the respective "lines of fragmentation" – be they territorial, societal, historical or ethnocultural – emerging since the 1990s are now mended and securitized in a new normative language merging both the "internal" and the "external" dimensions of the Russian nation-building.

Here, the need for a gradual convergence between the "Russian diaspora" and "Russian citizens" in the new identity project promoted since 2022 thus reflects a long-term process, first unraveling in an ideational dimension and then in concrete terms of policy-making, which is aimed not only to guarantee a tighter control of the state over the inherent diversity of Russianness "abroad", but also to solidify the idea of a legally-binding community of Russian citizens lying both *within* and *beyond* the political borders of the Russian Federation. In light of our analysis, we may first value the growing role of the presidential administration since the 2000s as being the true "balancing actor" among the different ideas (compatriots; russkii mir) emerging in the domestic political and intellectual debates. At the same time, we may recognize how the realm of citizenship policies has played the role of the "balancing language" through which a new identity project for Russia gradually came to be articulated and sanctioned: as Shevel (2012, p. 113) puts it, the "crux of the politics of citizenship" in Russia has always been "the question of what part of the former Soviet citizenry constitutes 'us'". Along these lines, we may understand how the case of the process of "passportization" in times of war in Ukraine is there to play the role of both a foreign policy instrument *and* a tool for identity projects: it responds to the need, on the one hand, for legitimizing the direct involvement of the Kremlin in the domestic affairs of its neighbouring state and, on the other, for making ethnic Russians and/or Russian speakers abroad again part of a legally-binding community of Russian citizens under the control of the Russian state.

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