

The local dynamics of nation building: Place-based identity politics in non-governmental actors' narratives of the Russian nation

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Abstract

The vague and shifting official characterization of patriotism as the central pillar of Russian identity accommodates diverse understandings of Russia in the service of a nation building project designed to legitimize Putin's regime. This paper explores how non-governmental actors in the cities of Kazan and Ekaterinburg mediate official discourses of patriotism and shape the process of nation building. Drawing on interviews and analysis of public communications, I show that actors such as museums, activist groups and religious institutions employ culturally established discursive practices of connecting different scales of belonging to anchor narratives of the nation in local symbols. Such practices can concretize the nation as an object of pride and belonging. However, these actors often simultaneously position themselves in place-based identity cleavages, and the imbrication of local identity politics in their narratives can problematize nation building by exposing contradictions in federal discourses or troubling the association of nation and state. Emphasizing the importance of emplaced processes constructing the nation in conjunction with other scales of belonging, I argue that nation building in Russia is complicated by meso-level practices of identity making that can simultaneously support and subvert it.

Introduction

Nation building is often equated with the mass consolidation of a national identity resulting from the policies and narratives of ruling elites promoting a vision of the nation that legitimizes the state. However, the concept has begun to be reconsidered in light of developments in the literature on nationalism highlighting the role of human agency in constructing the nation, with evidence showing that diverse actors shape nation building through meso and micro level practices (Isaacs & Polese, 2015, 2019). Building on this emerging understanding of nation building as an uneven process initiated by elites but shaped by actors with varying degrees of power and influence, this article brings attention to the emplacement of narratives mediating state discourses of the nation within contexts of local identity politics and its effects on nation building.

Following Wimmer (2018) I see nation building not as a brief process restricted to the early period of a state's political consolidation, but as a long-running project that is inherited by successive governments. This being the case, newer states can provide particularly insightful case studies for observing nation building policies in action. Unable to rely on a public socialized to perceive current political and geographical boundaries as reflective of a historical collective, the leadership of a young state must work hard to construct a state-linked nation and normalize identification with it. This article explores the case of post-Soviet Russia, where the state vision for a unified national community contends with strong regional and territorialized minority ethnic identities and a recent precedent of state collapse along ethno-territorial lines. Putin's nation building efforts have centered on the idea of patriotism as a traditional Russian value uniting people of different ethnic backgrounds. However, the effectiveness of this nation building effort has been variable to date (Goode, 2018, 2020a). Survey studies have indicated geographical differences in how the nation is understood and in the resonance of patriotism (Rutland, 2015; Zajda, 2015). The construction of national and local identities is often interlinked, such as where Russia acts as a key reference point for post-Soviet urban place-making (Parts, 2018). Attending to this interaction of scales of meaning-making offers insights into one way in which the agency of meso-level actors can affect nation building. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Kazan and Ekaterinburg in 2017-18 as part of a wider project, this article pursues this line of inquiry through the study of narratives of the nation in two major cities with contrasting ethno-cultural compositions and historical identities.

Below, I first discuss questions of agency in nationalism and nation building and outline a perspective on constructions of the nation as emplaced. These two starting points inform a subsequent review of the literature on challenges to official nation building posed by micro and meso level constructions of the nation in Russia. In the empirical sections, I illustrate the effects of local cleavages in identity politics on constructions of the nation in the narratives of non-governmental actors in Kazan and Ekaterinburg respectively.

The findings show that actors beyond the political sphere narrate the past, present and future of culture using discursive practices that situate Russian nationhood in relation to identity debates that are particularly salient in the city in question. As such, they illustrate the importance of emplacement to the ways regional actors exercise agency in contributing to the plurality of Russian identities. Most significantly, the findings show that meso-level actors construct the Russian nation in interplay with a range of other identities implying different scales, including local, minority ethno-national and regional identities. As a result, they can play a contradictory role in nation building, supporting it by rendering national history relatable to local audiences while also weakening it by disrupting official constructions of the local-national link or disassociating the nation from the state. These findings contribute to understanding of the processes shaping contemporary Russian nationalism and nation-building, and particularly the role played by public actors in spheres outside of politics and locations beyond Moscow. More broadly, the study strengthens understanding of nation building as shaped by meso-level practices by highlighting the emplaced politics of identity involved in non-elite narratives of the nation.

Nationalism, nation building and questions of agency

It has been convincingly argued that nationalist ideology has become embedded in institutions and practices at all levels of society, from government policy making and media production to everyday practices, such that the nation has become taken for granted as a universal category of identification (Billig, 1995; Malešević, 2019). At the same time, constructions of the nation and national identity are plural and actively contested at the vernacular level, as well as in public discourse (Bhabha, 1990; Verdery, 1993). Numerous scholars have observed that the forms given to the nation and the application of national categories come about through creative, varied and personally meaningful individual acts (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Hearn, 2007; Thompson, 2001). These include not only acts of public messaging on behalf of influential institutions but ordinary acts in everyday life, such as identifying practices as national or claiming national identity in certain contexts and not others (Brubaker, Feischmidt, Fox, & Grancea, 2006). In other words, the reproduction of nationalism involves distributed agency in the selective invoking of national categories. The potential explanatory power of accounting for agency in everyday reproduction of the nation to inform analysis of macro-level dynamics of nationalism continues to elicit debate in nationalism studies (Bonikowski, 2016; Hearn & Antonsich, 2018).

The agency of diverse actors in constructing the nation has received more limited attention in studies of nation building. This term is typically used to describe the process through which elites encourage mass identification with a vision of the nation as aligned with the boundaries of the state (Mylonas, 2012, p. xx). Williams and Smith (1983, p. 10) describe nation building as “an instrument for implanting a sense of national solidarity and consciousness, and of homogenizing and levelling heterogeneous and stratified

populations". Adopting this top-down perspective, studies of nation building often focus on macro-level and elite-led processes, such as the forging of alliances across ethnic and regional divides (Wimmer, 2018) and the involvement of international and geostrategic concerns in nation building policies (Mylonas, 2012). With the collapse of the USSR, scholars turned attention to nation building mechanisms through which leaders sought legitimacy for young states and their regimes (Brubaker, 2011; Kuzio, 2002), and the types of nationalism promoted in their narratives (Panov, 2010). While providing insight into the instrumental uses of nationalism by governments, these studies have elided the role of human agency at sub-state levels in influencing policies and narratives, and in the relative success of nation building efforts. As Isaacs and Polese (2015, 2019) have argued, official nation building relies on the acceptance and reproduction of discourses at the micro and meso level, and these are not the only responses to such discourses. Furthermore, state-endorsed symbols of the nation often create space for interpretation of its meaning and attributes. Competition between visions put forward by different actors can create public debate, as Sumartojo (2013) illustrates in the case of the Fourth Plinth on London's Trafalgar Square. Narratives produced by public-facing organizations outside of the political arena, such as museums, concretize the meanings of national symbols in their own ways (Blakkisrud & Kuziev, 2019; Levitt, 2015).

Despite significant discussion of human agency and plurality in constructions of the nation and the deployment of national categories, there has been limited reflection on the extent to which interpretations of majority nationhood reinforce an understanding of the nation state as the embodiment of the nation community, and thus contribute to nation building. Hearn and Antonsich (2018, p. 595) allude to this in noting "while banal nationalism clearly works for legitimizing the idea of the nation-state in the eyes of its members, it is not as clear how everyday nationalism stands in relation to the same question". There is, of course, a methodological challenge to capturing the political implications of everyday acts that reproduce the nation, since this would often require accessing unarticulated motivations. Furthermore, everyday references to the nation need not entail elaborated thoughts on its political meaning (Castelló & Mihelj, 2018, p. 562). However, evidence from less ordinary practices beyond everyday life shows that micro and meso level constructions of the nation do not necessarily support nation building, and can in fact undermine it. Benwell, Núñez, & Amigo (2018) show that mobilization around national flags can occur in the name of political claims against the state. Non-state actors have been shown to contest nation building discourses, linking the nation to stories and symbols unrelated to the state, even in authoritarian regimes (Isaacs, 2016). This study therefore begins with an understanding of nation building as an elite-initiated endeavor with an uneven trajectory shaped by complex, interactive and multi-directional processes through which public conceptions of the nation evolve. Although the nation is imagined as a political as well as a cultural community (Anderson, 1983), its existing political incarnation can inspire mixed feelings and alternative narratives. This article approaches this aspect of agency in nationalism, examining the

variable ways in which the narratives of meso-level actors can contribute to the course of nation building.

Emplacement and the construction of the nation in post-socialist cities

In addressing the agency of meso-level actors, I wish to draw attention to the effects of their emplacement in particular geographical contexts and to the construction of the nation as part of practices of place-making at multiple scales. The concept of place as a discreet, bounded space has been questioned in geography as part of discussion of the constructed nature of scale (Marston, 2000; Marston, Jones III, & Woodward, 2005; Massey, 1994; Paasi, 2004). The boundedness of locality is socially constructed and historically contingent (Paasi, 2004). Social life operates across different, interconnected spatialities and as such, the local scale cannot be understood as a closed space (Massey, 1994). However, the contribution of political institutions and discursive conventions to the construction of the local scale impacts on material realities (MacKinnon, 2011). This means that structures and cultures specific to a locale can affect social outcomes in particular ways. There is substantial evidence that local context plays an important role in mediating national-level public narratives of the nation by providing meaningful targets of national sentiment (Jones & Desforges, 2003; Pilkington, 2012; Traube, 2007). In focusing my analysis on the city level, I am concerned with the way in which narratives of the nation produced by actors embedded and invested in these cities are shaped by discourses and debates concerning sub-national as well as national identities that converge in ways particular to these contexts.

Furthermore, I am interested in the interaction of place-making and constructions of the nation. Rather than being fixed and bounded spaces, places are constituted through the particular but shifting interaction of networks and processes referring to the local scale and other scales, including the national scale (Massey, 1994). Processes giving meaning to the nation interact with processes concerning other categories of belonging with different scalar imaginaries, such as the city, region or trans-national religious community. Antonsich (2018) shows how vernacular constructions of the nation in the narratives of Italians with migrant background implicate a plurality of scales and blur identification with local and national communities. Such processes can recast the connection between scales of belonging in ways that sideline the state, such as in visions of the nation as a wider community rooted in localism (Confino & Skaria, 2002). This study will build on this work on identity and place-making that crosses scales to examine how multi-scalar place-making practices reflect localized dynamics of identity politics.

Places are constructed in terms of temporal as well as spatial relations. Different readings of a place's past inform competing understandings of its present and visions for its future (Massey, 1995). Post-socialist cities present particularly interesting cases of the meeting of different spatialities and temporalities in the local production of place and of the nation. Cityscapes have been dramatically overhauled as authorities and corporate actors have

sought to erase communist symbolism and project new local, regional, national and global identities, motivated by the tandem needs of consolidating support for new regimes and attracting investment for economic development (Diener & Hagen, 2013). The shifting nature of the construction of place is accelerated by the degree and pace of post-socialist transitions, but also by the ubiquity of visual urban symbols of communism to be replaced. Actors re-narrating the post-socialist city do not jettison the past altogether; rather, they produce new combinations of symbols from different eras and anchor new histories and future visions of place in them. Elite-led processes of change in post-socialist cities have at times led to clashing juxtapositions and met with resistance and alternative narratives (Fauve, 2015). The politics of place shaped by the interaction of discourses constructing identity on different scales in cities can impact strongly on the development of a nation's mainstream symbolic repertoire (Jones & Desforges, 2003). Cities are also sites from which divergences from state conceptions of national identity can emerge (Downing, 2015). While studies of nation building by meso level actors have often focused on capital cities, this study will highlight the significance of the emplacement of actors in cities in peripheral regions of Russia that have their own distinct identity politics concerning national identity.

Challenges to Russian nation building and the role of local actors

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the importance of the ethnic factor in its dissolution made it challenging but imperative for the post-Soviet Russian authorities to craft a narrative linking the new state to a sense of nationhood in the public imagination. Boris Yeltsin favored a liberal path, and early in his presidency he made efforts to contrast the new Russia with its Soviet predecessor, emphasizing a redirection away from totalitarian statehood. This discourse followed a dominant idea in liberal circles in the 1980s and 90s that Russia was on an inevitable, long-fought path towards democracy (Verkhovskii & Pain, 2012), and relied on a civic understanding of the nation as corresponding to citizens of Russian Federation modelled on the nationalisms of democratic and capitalist economies (Tuminez, 2000). However, seeking to bring on board different segments of the public, Yeltsin's government also used discourses of continuity with Russia's imperial mission and revived Soviet symbols, as well as constructing Russia as a pan-Slavic community, a community of Russian speakers and an ethnic community (Shevel, 2011). The ambivalent and inconsistent representation of a liberal civic path for the nation compounded the economic and social instability of the 1990s to leave a public disillusioned in its promises. By the early 2000s a 'civilizational nationalism', the idea that Russia has its own special conservative path, had taken hold among the Russian public (Verkhovskii & Pain, 2012). Putin was able to exploit the shift in public mood, championing statist patriotism as a point of convergence for Russians of all backgrounds, and promoting pride in a distinct Russian civilization based in conservative values (Verpoest & Claessen, 2017). Under Putin, history has become increasingly politicized, with the USSR's role in World War II pivotal to official narratives of the nation, and a 2014 law criminalizing the conscious public expression of lies about the war (Linchenko & Golovashina, 2019; Malinova, 2017). Yet, in response to

changing challenges to the regime's legitimacy, the historical content used by elites to support the discourse of patriotism has become more varied, not only between actors, but between narratives produced by single actors at different times (Chaterjee-Doody & Tolz, 2019; Sherlock, 2016). In this way, the notion of patriotism continues to provide a malleable basis for nation building.

There is no doubt that the concept of Russia as a nation state has gained public buy in under Putin. The discourse of a nation with strong continuity destabilized periodically by the conspiracies of the West is replicated in vernacular narratives, in connection to deteriorated diplomatic relations with the US and Europe in recent years (Blackburn, 2018). Official hailing of Soviet achievements is well received, with nationwide polls recording increasing nostalgia for the USSR (Levada Center, 2019), and Soviet memory seen as a point of connection with the national past among young people (Kasamara, Sorokina, & Maximenkova, 2018). The annexation of Crimea in 2014 boosted patriotic sentiment, superseding ethnic minority resentment of assimilatory policies as well as the middle class disaffection with Putin's erosion of democracy in the wake of his third election to presidential office (Sharafutdinova, 2020). At the same time, official discourses of national identity have not become uniformly accepted. A 2016 proposal for a law codifying the (civic) Russian nation was indefinitely suspended following resistance from representatives of ethnic minority republics and religious groups (Rustamova, 2017). Behind the generalized trends in patriotic sentiment lie significant divisions in conceptions of the nation. Polls show disparities in attitudes to the national past, including pride and shame associated with the Revolution, Stalin's purges, the figure of Stalin and the memory of the Great Patriotic War (Levada Center, 2019). Thus, unprocessed and divisive collective memory continues to pose challenges to nation building. Tellingly, the concept of patriotism is often interpreted as having little to do with the state, instead connoting personal attachment to a more abstract, temporally and spatially undefined '*rodina*' (Motherland), '*malaya rodina*' (the local Motherland) or family (Goode, 2018; Le Huérou, 2015). While Putin has sought to equate the Motherland with the state, populist opposition groups have amplified its broader meaning and portrayed it as a victim of the state's actions (Riabov, 2019). There is also evidence that younger Russians, though more exposed to Putin's dedicated education programs on the subject, are comparatively unpersuaded by patriotism (Baekken, 2021; Le Huérou, 2015).

Given these limits to the success of nation building in Russia, it seems prescient to unpack the processes through which federal discourses of the nation are mediated. As Goode (2020a) notes, nation building relies on the interested compliance of meso-level actors as mediators of state discourses. There are particularly strong grounds for accounting for the geographical emplacement of such actors in Russia. While increasingly politically centralized (Drobizheva, 2018), the state spans contexts highly differentiated in terms of distance from Moscow, proximity to national borders and ethnic composition. Regional identities are

strong even beyond ethnic republics (Clowes, 2016). While these can support patriotic sentiment by giving Russia concrete, locally-anchored meaning (Krylov, 2009), there are regional differences in how people construct the Russian nation, affecting, for example, attitudes to the role of oil and gas in Russian national identity (Rutland, 2015) and teachers' perceptions of bias in accounts of national history in federally approved textbooks (Zajda, 2015). In combination with other factors, unequal access to state investment may matter in this regard: residents of the Southern Kuril Islands/Northern Territories, subject to a territorial dispute between Russia and Japan, displayed shifts in national identity depending which state invested more locally (Richardson, 2016).

The state clearly recognizes the importance of local actors to nation building. The current State Program on Patriotic Education includes an aim to regulate interaction between federal, regional and local administrative bodies and "state, community and non-profit organizations conducting patriotic education" (Government of the Russian Federation, 2015). Non-profit actors deemed to support regime priorities have been strengthened by new funding channels for patriotic activities, while politically disfavored organizations have suffered from reduced income avenues and reputation (Daucé, 2014; Skokova, Pape, & Krasnopolskaya, 2018). This selective federal endorsement and patronization of local initiatives incentivizes local elites to also support activities branded as patriotic (Goode, 2020a). At the same time, as potential co-constructors of the Russian nation, local actors are not mere conveyors of state discourse; they are spatially situated and their investment in local identities can also bring to bear in their practices. Memory and emplaced experience can be mobilized in constructions of national identity, sometimes creating distance from the state (Bell, 2018; Pilkington, 2012). In ethnic republics, some minority nationalist cultural productions portray Russia as the national Other, rather than a state-linked Motherland (Gradszkova, 2018; Romero, 2018). Attending to the politics of place that emerge from contestation over identity is therefore an important entry point into understanding the potential impact of meso-level constructions of the nation.

Methods

The study is based on a qualitative analysis of public narratives of the Russian nation, collected as part of a larger project during two fieldwork visits to Kazan and Ekaterinburg in 2017 to 2018 through interviews with representatives of 10 non-governmental actors, documentation of their websites and exhibitions and participant observation of events. The selection of cities followed a 'most similar' approach to case studies (Seawright & Gerring, 2008): both are regional centers with strong economies that have experienced significant redevelopment in the post-Soviet period and changing official discourses regarding their symbolic relationship to the Russian nation. Their contrasting ethno-national compositions and historical contexts enable a comparison of the effects of different geographical contexts on constructions of the nation. Kazan, located on the Volga river in central European Russia, is administrative center of the Republic of Tatarstan, officially the homeland of the Tatar people, Russia's largest ethno-national minority. Although a 1990s project of political sovereignty for Tatarstan was abandoned in the wake of Putin's centralization drive, Kazan has continued to be remodeled in the style of a national capital. Its ethnically mixed population (48% Tatar, 49% Russian, 3% other ethnic groups¹) and cultural past have been used to brand Kazan a symbol of Russia's enduring multi-ethnic harmony, a cornerstone of Putin's narratives of the nation (Graney, 2007). Meanwhile, assimilationist federal policies have inspired increasing cultural Tatar nationalism in the city (Yusupova, 2018). Ekaterinburg, administrative center of Sverdlovsk oblast (region), is located just east of the Ural Mountains, considered the boundary between European and Asian Russia, and is home to a majority ethnic Russian population. The Russian Orthodox Church and affiliated institutions have invested significantly in rebranding the city as the inspiration for a revival of pre-revolutionary conservative Orthodox values in memory of Tsar Nicholas II, assassinated there in 1918. This narrative competes with concurrent investments in the city's image as the heart of Russian liberalism, realized in the 2015 inauguration of the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center.

A purposive sampling approach was used to include a range of types of non-governmental actor, including smaller and larger organizations focused on public information and engagement activities. This enabled patterns to be identified across the narratives of diverse actors, as well as for analysis of the specificity of different cases. The selection included museums, cultural centers, activist groups and religious institutions. The narrative analysis followed a discursive approach, attending to the social and situated nature of how people construct events and position themselves in a given context (Gergen & Gergen, 2007; Taylor, 2007). Narratives are not simply accounts conveying experience or facts, but mechanisms through which people interpret and represent reality and themselves in it within a given social, cultural and political context (Lawler, 2002, 2008). Narratives can therefore be understood to have functions, in that they achieve something in a social

¹ Figures available at : <https://www.kzn.ru/o-kazani/istoriya-kazani/>

interaction, whether the speaker is conscious of it or not (Riessman, 2008). From this understanding, I looked for discursive practices constructing the Russian nation and sub-national identities, both separately and in relation to each other, and positioning the actor in relation to debates concerning these. In doing so, I attended to the interpretation of culturally and politically normative discourses in circulation at local, regional and national scales. All data were produced and analyzed in Russian, with selected quotes translated for this article. The discussion presented below focuses on the narratives of six of the actors studied.

Kazan

Official municipal and regional narratives of Kazan as a symbol of Russia's multicultural harmony often involve the discursive practice of identity nesting. This practice constructs a hierarchy of scales of belonging, for example to a city, region and nation (Herb & Kaplan, 1999), implying that identification with smaller and larger scale reference points are compatible and even mutually supportive. In narratives about Kazan and Tatarstan, identity nesting is also used to place ethnic identities, understood as fitting within a statist Russian identity. This understanding underpins federal policies on ethno-cultural diversity and originates in Soviet nationalities policy (Rutland, 2010; Slezkine, 1994). For example, in a speech marking Tatarstan's annual 'Day of the Republic', the republic president Rustam Minnikhanov, stated: "This memorable day unites all people of Tatarstan (*Tatarstantsy*) who cherish the values of patriotism, hard work, and respect for the traditions of multi-ethnic Russia and their home republic" (Press Service of the President of the Republic of Tatarstan, 2020). By linking ethnic plurality, region and state in this way, local political actors in Kazan comply with federal pressure to reinforce patriotic sentiment while also indicating support for the strong sub-state and ethnic identities of their constituencies. The idea of nested identities continues to retain broad popularity among the Russian public (Blackburn, 2020). However, in Kazan it sits in tension with a perception voiced by some activist groups that Tatar and Russian cultures compete for survival locally. In a context of federal policy developments restricting minority cultural rights and an abandoned project for regional political sovereignty, some perceive the Russian nation as assimilative and encroaching. Meanwhile, in response to the growing visibility of cultural Tatar nationalism, local activist groups have formed in defense of ethnic Russian culture and Russian language education. The following discussion explores these opposing positions in narratives of the Russian nation produced by three non-governmental actors in Kazan: the National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, the Tatar Youth Forum and the Russian National Cultural Alliance of the Republic of Tatarstan.

The practice of identity nesting is evident in the narratives of the National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, a prominent multi-sited actor funded primarily by the regional government. The museum presents itself as "the main repository of the historical and

cultural heritage of the republic”, and also frames its activities as fostering Russian patriotism, as seen in a statement regarding its work with children: “The main goal is patriotic, aesthetic education through the development of knowledge of the history, culture and nature of the native land (krai), and the development of a schoolchild’s identity” (“National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan,” n.d.). In practice, the museum often understates Russian statist identity in its reproductions of identity nesting discourses. A key theme running through the museum’s exhibits is the historical continuity of harmonious co-existence between ethnic groups in the region. In an exhibition entitled “The Peoples of Tatarstan through the Prism of the Centuries”, the opening panel states:

The exhibition introduces the ethnocultural uniqueness of Tatarstan, where diversity and distinctiveness have closely intertwined, along with the centuries-long traditions of the peoples of the republic... Folk holidays are celebrated across the whole republic, carrying their history from the depths of the centuries. (National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, 2018b)

Absent from this narrative of the region is any reference to tension between Russian and non-Russian ethno-national identities in the past or present, leaving a rose-tinted impression of cultural harmony untouched by politics. Interestingly, although multiple ethnic identities are seen here to nest within regional identity, the Russian state is not mentioned. In addition, the museum takes care to highlight the importance of ethnic and regional identities in their own right. One example is coverage of historical events in the Tatar quest for sovereignty. As a curator emphasized, the Museum’s centenary exhibition on the Russian Revolution deliberately highlighted the movement for the creation of a Tatar national republic during this period and its brief fruition: “My colleagues very clearly noted that for the Kazan province, the national question was always very salient. And so, in the top area of this exhibition we specifically show the resolution of the national question about the creation of a republic.” (S. Izmailova, personal communication, April 21, 2018). Despite this emphasis, no connection is drawn in the exhibition between the early 20th century developments towards Tatar sovereignty and the renewal of activism for such an arrangement in the 1990s, framed then as reviving the long-desired national political trajectory advanced in the earlier period (Faller, 2011; Christopher Williams, 2011). This omission leaves it up to exhibition visitors to draw their own conclusions, and thus avoids the controversial suggestion that Tatar national claims might challenge or compete with Russian patriotism.

Presenting a local view on the past, the museum thus selects and frames content to balance adherence to the mainstream discourse of nested identities and patriotism with adherence to its regional mandate and sensitivity to different understandings of the relationship between place, ethnicity and nation within its audience. Another example can be seen in the permanent exhibition of a subsidiary branch, the Great Patriotic War Memorial Museum, which displays personal items belonging to soldiers and details the fate of local

men and women who took part in the war. The text of panels accompanying the exhibits repeatedly blurs loyalty to the region and to the wider people of the state-as-homeland. At the same time, it suggests emotional connections between the war generation and today's local residents as a basis for continuity of identity. One panel reads:

Currently over 279 thousand veterans of the Great Patriotic War live in Tatarstan, among whom over 29 thousand took part in the Great Patriotic War and around 250 thousand were workers on the home front. They are concerned about the military patriotic upbringing of the generation growing up today, the future of their children and grandchildren. Today's generation should know and remember the past. It is important not to allow extremism to emerge in order to prevent wars and preserve peace on our planet. In Tatarstan, people remember and honour the heroism of the people in the years of the Great Patriotic War. A Memorial Book of Tatarstan with the names of fallen countrymen [zemliaki] has been published in 26 volumes.

(National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, 2018a)

While the Russian nation is not explicitly mentioned here, the state as nation is implied in the language of patriotism, the home front and the heroism of the people. The expression of admiration for the patriotism of a previous local generation, ongoing continuity of memory of 'the past', and desire for its continuity into the future together portray the regional manifestation of a wider collective culture aligning with the state. Continuity is implied in the suggestion of an inter-generational link formed by the concern of living veterans for the upholding of patriotic values among new generations, and the materialization of today's local reverence for the past victors in the form of a book. This lends moral weight to the concept of a statist Russian nation united by patriotic devotion that endures regardless of the change of borders, population and state structure. Yet the collective is also constructed as regional; for example, "fallen countrymen" clearly refers only to people from Tatarstan. This blurring of identity groups serves to mitigate local sensitivities over which identity referent Tatarstan's residents today feel they belong to, such that the Museum can encourage all local visitors to identify as carriers of memory and loyalty, while also addressing government pressure to support Russian nation building. Reproducing the nation building discourse of nesting identities for a local audience can thus be a delicate process. The museum's narratives on long-term continuity of local inter-ethnic harmony and unity contribute to a place-making process that does not contradict official Russian nation building efforts, but implies support for them, rather than explicitly stating it.

Russia is constructed quite differently in the narratives of the Tatar Youth Forum, a community and network organization supporting the revival of national consciousness among young Tatars. The Forum strives to find creative ways to make Tatar identity appealing and relevant to young people, responding to concerns about the increasing dominance of the Russian language in the region, and a perception of Tatar culture as vulnerable. Rather than nesting identities, the Youth Forum's narratives construct boundaries between Russia's (ethnic) nations and identify a need to keep a sense of them as

separate. The Forum chair describes confronting the public with the idea that disengagement with the national language and distance from its traditions are an existential problem for the Tatars:

When I present for an audience, I always ask ‘What’s the first thing you think of when people mention the Tatar language?’ They say, you know, ‘grandpa, grandma, a tyubeteika², Sabbantui³, things like that. I ask them what those things have in common, and they reply that they were invented 1000 years ago, that they were part of everyday life a long time ago. I say ‘that means our language is pretty much dying if it’s associated with that past’. (T. Yarullin, personal communication, April 20, 2018)

The Forum thus publicly articulates its concerns about the trajectory of Tatar culture given its status within Russia. As the deputy chair of the Forum puts it, “there is a problem with the positioning of Tatar culture” (A. Faizrakhmanov, personal communication, May 10, 2018). The association of the Tatar language and culture with older generations and out of date practices is understood as indicating a lack of renewal and a trend towards assimilation into a Russian sub-strand of globalized culture. The deputy chair explains that “Russian cultural formats are partly copied from anglophone ones which come from Moscow to the provinces. It’s like a double globalization, and that globalization is presented to us as something important and necessary for us.” By identifying the fate of the local and the particular –Tatar national culture in Tatarstan - as undermined by the spread of general, global “Russian cultural formats”, the Youth Forum implicates Russia as a national ‘Other’ that poses a threat to the Tatars. The practice of ‘Othering’ derives from a relational understanding of the national self that leads to an impetus to maintain distinctiveness from other nations (Triandafyllidou, 1998). As the deputy chair later notes: “...use of Russian has grown, and associating yourself with the Russian Federation has become more widespread, and that detachment, you know, that sense that we are different, it’s going.” (A. Faizrakhmanov, personal communication, May 10, 2018). In contrast to nation building narratives of Russia’s age-old harmonious multi-ethnic unity and the mutually reinforcing nature of ethnic and statist identities, the premise here is that the current growth of statist Russian national identity among Tatars endangers the continuity of the Tatar nation.

Triandafyllidou (1998) argues that confrontation with the significant Other at a time of cultural or political crisis for the nation transforms its identity by bringing out its relevance in a contemporary reality. In this case, although representatives of the Youth Forum use the language of crisis, explicit confrontation with the Other is politically non-viable, but Russia as the significant other is made present implicitly in activists’ promotion of the need to regenerate. Rather than reviving a victim narrative prevalent in public narratives before the

² Tyubeteika is a type of Tatar hat with national symbolic status.

³ Sabbantui is a festival celebrated by Tatar communities in Spring, traditionally in rural areas but now also in cities, to mark the start of the sowing season.

fall of the Soviet Union (Rorlich, 1999), the Forum frames the problem facing Tatar culture as one of outmodedness or a need for revitalization. This both softens the implication of political criticism and takes a proactive stance, offering the community agency in transforming its fate. Many of the Forum's activities highlight Kazan's Tatar heritage and reclaim local sites as Tatar rather than Russian. The Forum blends symbols of tradition with contemporary cultural forms, and uses urban history to link Tatars today to their past. Its signature public-oriented activity is an annual street festival attracting thousands of visitors, inspired by a bazaar located in the old Tatar district of Kazan at the turn of the 19th Century, popularized in national lore by the poet and Tatar hero Gabdullah Tuqay. The Forum chair describes how it began:

It's a symbolic place but practically everyone had forgotten about it. We decided to recreate it and on Tuqay Memorial Day... we came out onto the streets, dressed like 100 years ago. One person dressed as a market vendor, another as a loader, you know, the people who carry things, and we sold the things they used to sell in the old days. One person brought something home-made, some accessories, clothes with Tatar ethnic features... And there was an open mike; anyone who wanted could speak. One person did a reading, then there was music, we published a newspaper... (T. Yarullin, personal communication, April 20, 2018)

The chair and deputy chair both express the achievements of the Forum in terms of their success in adapting Tatar themes into marketable events, practices and symbols that attract demand and interest in identifying as Tatar, rather than imploring people to preserve values and practices eroded by assimilative policies. The Russian nation is not framed as a threatening presence; yet, the absence of discursive practices of nesting identities in the Forum's public narratives leaves clear the distinction between their approach and that of actors such as the National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan. In this view, Tatar identity is not safe under Russia's wing, but rather needs to become competitive in its own right. In reclaiming spaces in the city as sites of Tatar revival, the Forum contributes to an alternative place-making process in which the local 'banalization' of Russian culture is questioned and disrupted.

Another side to this tension present in Kazan can be seen in the practice of Othering by actors promoting the rights of Russians. The status of Kazan as capital of an ethnic republic makes it a location within the Russian state where the Russian nation understood in ethnic terms can be experienced as marginal. In this context, the Russian National Cultural Alliance of the Republic of Tatarstan was established to campaign for the preservation of Russian national heritage in the region. Its website describes the continued contribution of Russian cultural and religious values and practices to the region over centuries as follows:

Russian culture has a consolidating, unifying significance in Russia. And so, on the territory of the [old] Kazan region, due to well-known historical circumstances, Russians were the main socially generative force, which gave them great

responsibility for its political, economic and cultural development. In modern Tatarstan, Russian people, making up more than 40% of its population and constituting the ethnic majority in large cities, continue to play a significant role in the functioning of the republic, reviving as far as they are able their thousand year national cultural and Orthodox religious traditions. (“Russian National Cultural Alliance of the Republic of Tatarstan,” n.d.)

This text legitimizes the Russian national claim to the region in implicit defense against an exclusive Tatar national claim. Rather than questions of sovereignty or cultural identity relating to the nation as a whole, seen in the narratives of the Tatar Youth Forum, here it is the local legitimacy of the nation that is at stake. The thousand year national trajectory, a trope popularized by Putin to support a statist vision of the nation (Malinova, 2019), is put to use in defending the position of ethnic Russians. The website also states that “The center of attention of the RNCO is the spiritual and historical legacy of the nation, which needs to be nurtured and developed” (“Russian National Cultural Alliance of the Republic of Tatarstan,” n.d.). The references to spirituality and the Orthodox Church indicate a narrower understanding of the Russian nation than that of federal narratives of the multi-ethnic patriotic nation. Indeed, the focus of attention is Russian culture, defined in ethnic terms, and its lead role in the context of a shared, multi-ethnic state. The subsuming of the ethnic Other in the local context is celebrated in positive terms such as ‘socially generative’ and ‘responsibility’. The circumstances of the capture of Kazan by Ivan the Terrible are alluded to without critical assessment, despite this event being considered a national loss for many Tatars. This perspective recalls the later Soviet discourse of Russians as the ‘state-forming nation’, continued in the rhetoric of Russian ethno-nationalist groups, and which Putin has used at times when nationalist constituencies needed to be appeased (Kolstø, 2016). At the same time, the need for a specifically local revival of Russian culture suggests that the competition with the internal Other continues.

As with the Tatar Youth Forum, the Alliance disregards the identity nesting discourse of official nation building narratives, and instead constructs competition between Russia’s ethnic groups locally in order to promote actions defending the heritage of one group. While there is no explicit opposition voiced in any of the above examples to the notion Russia as a harmonious multi-ethnic nation, they suggest that it can be as helpful as problematic in the context of place-based identity politics. Depending on their proximity to causes focused on the defense of ethnic rights, in carrying out their mandates, actors interpreting the nation for a diverse local public can offer lukewarm support or even undermine the nation building prerogative to normalize this notion.

Ekaterinburg

Russia's regions have often been heralded as the true source of authentic national culture in essentializing narratives observed to both idealize and demean (Parts, 2018). The flexibility of official nation building discourses about the regions has allowed space for highly contradictory visions of the essence embodied by local place to develop. During the post-Soviet period, Ekaterinburg has seen the emergence of two clashing national symbolic repertoires associated with the city, backed by actors with significant political clout. On the one hand, the Russian Orthodox Church has hailed it the sacred place of the abrupt ending to the Romanov dynasty and the heart of a revival of traditionalist conservatism in its memory; on the other, the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center has promoted Ekaterinburg as the home of the late first Russia president and the liberal values for which he stood. A more marginal vision of the city based on liberal humanist values has also emerged, partly in connection to the memory of victims of mass executions on the city outskirts under Stalin. This section discusses these contrasting repertoires and their implications for nation building through the narratives of three non-governmental actors, the Ekaterinburg Diocese, the Yeltsin Center and the Ekaterinburg History Museum.

The Orthodox Church has increasingly taken a prominent role in shaping mainstream discourses of patriotism in Russia, framing itself as central to the nation's cultural past and future (Rousselet, 2015). The Ekaterinburg Diocese has been central to the promotion of a vision of the city as defined by the assassination of Nicholas II and his family, canonized as martyrs, and as the natural source of a revival of traditional values inspired by their memory. In 2003, it oversaw the completion of the commemorative Cathedral on the Blood on the site where the assassinations took place during the Russian Civil War, and new memorial buildings have been added alongside it since. The Diocese hosts a series of annual events to commemorate the deaths, which have acquired patriotic meaning as acts of collective repentance and prayer for both the local homeland and the nation (Rousselet, 2015). In the 2018 Public Forum for the Preservation of the Legacy of Tsar Nicholas II, marking a century since the tsar's death, Metropolitan Kirill, head of the Ekaterinburg Diocese, emphasized the role of the city, noting that it has become "a symbol of the tsar family, and of our homeland, for in this place 100 years ago tragic events took place – tragic for our people" (Metropolitan Kirill, 2018). Other events organized by the Diocese include a high-profile annual procession in which participants conduct a 20 kilometer pilgrimage from the Church on the Blood to Ganina Yama, the burial site of their remains. Symbolic sites in and around the city thus play a vital role in the performance of public ritual constructing the nation as the community of memory envisaged by the Church.

Arguably, the rooting of a vision of the nation embodied by its past leaders in local sites should support nation building. The events organized by the Church provide opportunities for Ekaterinburg's residents to connect physically and emotionally with familiar local places as both material remnants of the national past and symbols of the atemporal national

community. The nation-wide publicity around these events creates a potential source of local pride in the significance accorded to the sites. The framing of Nicholas II as a symbol of the essence of the nation to be restored, rooted in Ekaterinburg, is reproduced in the narratives of other actors, such as the local branch of the 'Russia – My History' Park, opened in 2017⁴. The park's director highlights the symbolic connection between the city and the Romanov family: "Since the history of our region is closely tied to the history of the Romanov household, our park has de facto become the first point on the Imperial Procession route in Ekaterinburg and in the whole of the Middle Urals." ("Russia - My History' Park, Ekaterinburg," n.d.). At the same time, this version of the nation and the city at its heart is inevitably exclusive, as it is closely intertwined with the Church's efforts to consolidate the Orthodox community and raise its profile as a broader moral authority. Metropolitan Kirill addresses the public at large in noting that efforts to revive the memory of the tsar are intended to "enlighten society regarding the true role of the last Russian emperor, which will help to re-establish the good name of Tsar Nicholas II and the study of the true history of Russia" (Metropolitan Kirill, 2018). However, at the 2018 Public Forum, the list of speakers consisted entirely of Orthodox leaders and academic scholars of Orthodoxy. Alongside talks, it included Orthodox prayer rituals led by the Metropolitan and a performance of Orthodox choral music (Ekaterinburg Diocese, 2018). The Church's use of the figure of the tsar binds nation and state, suggesting a message of loyalty to the present regime; but the Church is also bound into this vision, and so Russia is presented unequivocally as a religious, and specifically Christian nation. The exclusive optics of the commemorative events only serve to highlight the uncomfortable fit of this narrative with federal discourses of Russia as a nation of multi-ethnic and multi-confessional unity.

Running counter to this ethnicized conservative construction of local and national identity, a competing vision of the city identifies it as the heart of Russian liberalism. A driving force of this vision is the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center, established in 2015 by presidential decree to honor his legacy and foster civic debate. The Center contains archives and a museum portraying Russian history through the lens of Yeltsin's presidency and early life, and hosts exhibitions and events on contemporary social and cultural themes. As co-founder Pavel Lungin states:

The main idea of the Yeltsin Center is that we are living and building a new Russia. Of course, it's still the same country that, with its thousands of historical cultural lines and all its genes, is linked to the original and eternal Russia. You may ask, what is new? [The answer is] that Freedom has appeared. We always thought that freedom would come from the West. But it came from the Urals, from the depths of Russia, in the persona of Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin. Our new Russia is a state based on freedom

⁴ This expanding state endorsed network of centers (in 24 cities at the time of writing) was developed from an exhibition on the Romanovs created by the Orthodox Church. A collaborative project between the Church and the state, it aims to foster patriotism through engagement with national history using immersive, interactive multi-media formats (Klimenko, 2021).

of speech, freedom of movement, freedom of opinion, freedom of enterprise and many other freedoms. (Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center, 2018)

This narrative presents a homegrown, native version of liberalism emerging in today's Russia as a result of Yeltsin's initiating reforms. Yeltsin's upbringing in the Urals region is used to frame the local area as the heart of the nation, the defining place from where Russian liberalism took root. Furthermore, this milestone in Russian state history is presented as linked to an 'eternal' continuity of the nation's essence. This narrative is echoed in the Yeltsin Center's eight-minute animation on the history of Russia, which opens its permanent exhibition on this subject. A panel entitled 'Labyrinth', introducing the animation, begins with the words "The entire history of Russia has been a search for freedom. Although Russian democracy was born before Russian autocracy, the country's path to freedom as the highest value turned out to be long and hard." The metaphor of a labyrinth framing disruptive political events presents Russia as overcoming a difficult journey from its freedom-based origins. The description of this journey ends with the claim "It was only in the 1990s that Russia at last found the path to liberation from its totalitarian past". Russia is thus portrayed as having emerged from its troubles to reach a new height in its progressive trajectory.

This portrayal of Russian history undoubtedly clashes with federal discourses of Russia as a state and nation always united in its successes and self-fulfillment. In sharp contrast also to the Church-led depiction of the Romanovs as saints and national heroes, the Center highlights a tension between the people as nation and all their rulers prior to Yeltsin. The Center has been subject to vocal criticism by conservative public figures, most prominently by Nikita Mikhalkov, celebrated film director and president of the Russian Culture Foundation, an organization focused on cultural preservation. However, the potential for the populist tone of the Center's narrative to challenge contemporary nation building efforts is curtailed by its concluding resolution. Here, the post-Soviet period becomes the first time when the Russian nation and state align. The Center is at pains to show that its work does not concern Russia's present political direction. As a representative emphasizes: "We talk about the past, after all. If we talk about the present, in our educational programs, it's always about the theory. We do not carry out political activity and we have to say this and emphasize it constantly" (Oleg Lutokhin, personal communication, May 23, 2018). Conspicuously absent from the chronological overview of national history in the Center's museum is any assessment of the status of freedom in the actions of the state in the years since Yeltsin's presidency. The exhibition ends with footage of well-known public figures commenting on the permanent benefits of Yeltsin's reforms. Established by presidential decree and accountable to board members close to the federal authorities, the Center clearly avoids criticism of the current administration. Operating in a context of repressive measures on dissenting actors, claims of political disengagement remove grounds for censure in an increasingly illiberal climate and enable the Center's continued promotion of

liberal values in line with its mandate to celebrate Yeltsin's legacy. As regards nation building, the Center's narrative poses a seemingly audacious challenge to federal discourses of an atemporal link between rulers and the nation. However, ultimately it reinforces the legitimacy of the post-Soviet state, arguably compromising its dedication to liberal values in the process.

In contrast to the state-aligned narratives of the Diocese and the Yeltsin Center, a people-centered approach to constructing the nation emerges in the narratives of the Ekaterinburg History Museum, a more modestly sized and resourced institution. This museum seeks to contribute to a sense of local place, as is made clear in its overall mission: "to study and popularize the history of Ekaterinburg, facilitating the consolidation of the city community and the development of regional identity" (Ekaterinburg History Museum, 2018). Like other actors narrating the past, the Museum's activities involve the interpretation of wider themes and events in Russian history. An emphasis on empathy with fellow residents facing the challenges of everyday life in different periods encourages the public to consider the nation's past from the perspective of values of individual freedom, appealing to the liberal side of the divide in visions of the nation in Ekaterinburg.

The museum director emphasizes the administration's efforts to present history in ways that inspire in visitors a sense of closeness with the past: "We work with microhistory... this enables us to evaluate historical reality, historical processes differently and make them more human, more on a level with us, right?" (S. Kamensky, personal communication, June 13, 2018). One project under development that he describes will gather the testimonies of elderly residents and use these as a public memory resource for exploring the local Soviet experience. Through this type of activity, the Museum adopts an approach seen in museums elsewhere of enriching public memory narratives with examples of vernacular recollections, developing its theme on everyday history by bringing unheard voices in the community into its narrative (Rowe, Wertsch, & Kosyaeva, 2002). This follows its strategy of focusing on micro-level experiences rather than grand narratives about the past (Ekaterinburg History Museum, 2018): "Personal themes and the most ordinary objects give the exhibitions a non-heroic, everyday dimension, while uncovering the history of the city, conveying the spirit and sense of bygone eras". As the director clarifies in interview, "We specifically accentuate the topic of everyday people's lives, the topic of the everyday, because in our country there is always, very often an emphasis on the big events, the big dates, the big processes, the big characters." (S. Kamensky, personal communication, June 13, 2018). In a local context of prominent and conflicting grand narratives of the nation focused on exalted leaders, the Museum thus seeks to guide its audience beyond a celebratory approach to the national past as that of the state.

A branch of the Museum is dedicated to the local memory of victims of political repressions, in particular the thousands of political prisoners executed under Stalin at the 12th Kilometer

site just outside Ekaterinburg. This area of its work builds on a long-running campaign led by the NGO Memorial to acknowledge this aspect of the city's place in national history, a campaign which has represented the nation as a secular community of shared pain (Bogumił, Moran, & Harrowell, 2015). The topic of Stalin's repressions has received ambivalent treatment in public discourse in recent years and remains controversial. While Putin opened space for some recognition of this past with the unveiling of a national monument in Moscow on the eve of the centenary (Ryan, 2018), highlighting the human cost of Russia's achievements is understood by some actors to contradict the drive for patriotism (Goode, 2020b). In Ekaterinburg, the Orthodox Church has sought to control discourse on the repressions, and their efforts successfully delayed the erection of a secular commemorative sculpture for over 25 years (Bogumił et al., 2015). The Museum's focus on everyday experience rather than grand narratives of the state creates space for difficult aspects of Ekaterinburg's past to be conveyed as an exposition of local rather than national history, and thus less easily politicized. Throughout its exhibitions, the Museum portrays the collective past as distinct from, and often at odds with, the trajectory of the state's strength and military achievements. While not explicitly oppositional, its constructions of the nation do not support the state's legitimacy. Instead they promote a sense of a timeless community of experience of the state's actions, not always benign, and encourage a sense of identification with this community based on feelings of local solidarity. While lacking the support afforded to statist interpretations of Russian nationhood, evidence elsewhere of Russian patriotism disassociated from the state in vernacular narratives suggests that this approach may resonate with the public (Goode, 2018; Le Huérou, 2015).

The conservative - liberal divide is not specific to Ekaterinburg but has a long history in Russia that continues to shape debates on the nation's identity at the national level (Chebankova, 2015). However, the symbolic resources of post-Soviet Ekaterinburg and their exploitation by powerful actors have embedded this divide in understandings of the city itself. The erection of the imposing Yeltsin Center building on a central embankment of the Iset' river opposite the Church on the Blood has brought material form to the dynamics of contention over Ekaterinburg's place in the nation's past and future. Furthermore, this visual reminder of the clash of two locally rooted paths for Russia can be seen to add an indefinite question mark to the city's identity. An installation by street artist Timofei Radya adorning a former factory building on the embankment in 2017-20, re-erected by popular demand following the building's removal, captures this sentiment. In the place where three decades earlier, a sign proclaimed "*Glory to Labour*", it spells out three simple questions to passers-by across the water: "*Who are we? Where are we from? Where are we going?*". In rooting the nation in local place, non-governmental actors in Ekaterinburg position themselves in a dynamic of intensified division between competing socio-political philosophies underpinning this cleavage in local identity politics. By concretizing the nation around figures, places and events of local significance, they may give substance to federal discourses of patriotism. However, the visibility of local divisions over symbols and values of

the nation also draws attention to the contradictions of Putin's generalist nation building approach and opens space for alternative emplaced constructions of Russia as unconnected to the state.

Conclusion

Constructions of the nation vary not only in the attributes and boundaries that they claim for it, but in the extent to which they support or complicate official nation building efforts. While nationalism scholars have dedicated substantial debate to human agency at different levels in practices of constructing the nation, there has been little reflection on the potential for such practices to complicate governments' efforts to positively implicate the state in mass national identity. The discussion above has drawn attention to this aspect of agency in the discursive practice of nationalism, examining narratives of the nation produced by meso-level actors in two Russian cities.

The cases explored in Kazan and Ekaterinburg provide an indicative snapshot of the importance of place in meso-level constructions of the nation beyond the political sphere. In these examples, the nation is given meaning together with geographically linked sub-national identities and in relation to place-specific identity cleavages. The actors in question have in common an orientation towards interests and sensitivities particular to their local audiences, and their narratives reflect an interest in positioning themselves in relation to these. In Kazan, constructions of the Russian nation account for the presence of competing ethnic identities in the region and city, while in Ekaterinburg, the nation is seen to be rooted in competing local symbols and sites associated with liberal or conservative ideologies. Thus, it is not simply that constructions of the nation vary in content between locales across the state; they are steeped in a particular politics of place.

The analysis also highlights how non-governmental actors' use of discursive resources linking identity at different scales, such as nesting, Othering and local rooting, can render the nation meaningful and relevant in local terms. The selective and creative application of these discourses is one way in which these actors exercise agency in the reproduction of nationalism. Emplaced agency at the meso-level contributes to dynamics of contestation and complexity around nation building, since such acts of meaning-making can highlight contradictions in federal narratives or cast doubt on the link between nation and state.

Finally, actors based in a single city come from different starting points in narrating the Russian nation. The nature of their support structures and mandates constrains and shapes their narratives. In Ekaterinburg, the political leverage and independent financial backing of both the Ekaterinburg Diocese and the Yeltsin Center have enabled them to widely promote political agendas that frame key divisions in understandings of the nation in the city. In Kazan, actors close to the regional authorities construct a symbiotic relationship between the continuity of different nations and remain silent on local tensions evident in narratives

produced by activist organizations. Meanwhile, contributions by smaller actors in both cities give voice to countercurrents that shed light on local tensions around mainstream national identity narratives.

The sharp drop in Putin's popularity in the year of the COVID-19 pandemic and of controversial constitutional amendments has shown that there is an increasingly mobilizable tension between the way the Russian nation is envisaged at the federal level and attitudes among significant parts of the public nationwide. Understanding the evolution of contemporary Russian nationalism requires greater attention to narratives and debates developing at the local level and their interaction with the broader context of national discourse. As this article has shown, attending to the dynamics of constructing the nation in places where local history creates sensitivities around certain federal discourses can be particularly instructive. While it lies beyond the scope of this study, attention to vernacular responses to emplaced public narratives of the nation would further contribute to more fully apprehending the process of nation building in Russia. More broadly, the findings of this study show that nation building should not be understood as an isolated process of identity formation, but as one that interacts with, shapes and is shaped by other identity forming processes at different scales and with varying levels of resonance.

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