The Russian Nation-State Paradox: Geographical and Historical Definition

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Abstract
This study aims to analyze the structural contradictions faced bx Russia's nation-state model, particularly within the framework of geographical and historical factors. Russia's political culture has followed a unique developmental trajectory. shaped by its imperial history, which does not align with modern nation-state norms. The structural framework of Stephen Kotkin (2016), who posits that "the state is thick, while society is thin," is comparatively examined alongside Andrei Tsygankov's (2003) approach classifying post-Soviet Russia's geopolitical imagination. Additionally, the discussions on empire state and identity by historians such as Dominic Lieven (1995) and James Cracraft (1986) are explored.

Key words: Geography, Nation-State, Foreign policy, Russia

Introduction

This study questions Russia's potential to become a nation-state by examining the connection between statehood and societal identity through the concept of the *"Russian Nation-State Paradox"*. Historically, Russia expanded as an empire but has never fully evolved into a modern nation-state model. This condition is determined not only by political choices but also by geographical and historical constraints. While modern nation-states are typically built upon a homogeneous population structure defined by clear natural borders and a unifying elite identity-Russia has developed its statehood across a vast territory without sharply delineated geographical boundaries, encompassing diverse ethnic and cultural groups.

Russia's geography is boundless, open, and crisscrossed by rivers, creating a terrain vulnerable to external threats. These characteristics have necessitated state institutionalization since early periods, driven by security imperatives and the need to monitor population movements. The Russian state developed as an entity compelled to continuously expand-yet this expansion relied not on societal participation but on centralized authority (Kotkin, 2016: 4).

The core research question of this study is: Can Russia become a modern nation-state given its historical and geographical conditions? In addressing this question, the analysis will comparatively examine national identity, centralization, geopolitical imagination, and state-society relations.

I. Historical and Geographical Conditions: Formation of a State Without Borders

Russia's political culture has been fundamentally intertwined with its geographical determinants. The absence of clearly defined natural borders has necessitated both constant vigilance against external threats and institutional development within an expansive "topographic void" This reality has led to political borders being perceived not as natural formations but as political instruments in decision-making processes, distinguishing Russia from Western European nation-state models.

According to historian Lubavsky: The Russian population was placed within the limits of its sedentary, in the most ancient times in groups, oases among steppes, forests and swamps. This circumstance, we can say, is not sufficiently put forward and evaluated in our historical literature. Meanwhile, it explains very well some important features of Old Russian life, namely: political discord in ancient Russia, the lack of political unity, division by lands and princedoms. All these phenomena stemmed from the same basic fact - the physical spatial separation of different groups of the Russian population (Lubavsky, 1909).

According to Kotkin's analysis, Russia's borderland issues have necessitated the state's perpetual expansion, with this expansion typically occurring through popular initiative rather than state direction. The state would subsequently follow these movements to impose order (Kotkin, 2016: 4). Consequently, this process produced a governance model that was strong yet disconnected from popular engagement at the periphery (Lieven, 1995: 610).

Cracraft (1986), focusing particularly on the Peter the Great era, emphasizes that the Russian state centralized not to resemble the West but to maintain its strength. Peter the Great's reforms prioritized authority and military capacity rather than popular political participation (Cracraft, 1986). This further deepened the state-society divide.

II. 19th Century Russia: Modernization, State Structure and the Formation of the Understanding of the Nation

The 19th century represents a defining period for modern state institutionalization in Russian political history. When compared to the emerging nation-state norms in Europe, this process followed a distinct developmental trajectory in Russia. Modernization efforts were not aimed at constructing a participatory political system based on social contract theory, but rather at reinforcing centralized governance and maintaining the multinational imperial structure.

Stephen Kotkin (2016) identifies historical continuity as the primary obstacle to Russia's evolution into a nation-state. According to him, Russia's modernity emerged not from society (as in the West) but from the state. Consequently, Russian society has remained more passive in political participation compared to its Western counterparts. The state pursued a modernization model that excluded popular engagement, justifying it through security and stability concerns (Kotkin, 2016: 4). However, while Kotkin explained this difficulty with the historical geopolitical structure and lack of social mobilization, Tsygankov (2003) emphasized the identity plurality, civilizational imagination and the internalized nature of foreign policy. This approach prioritized the modernization of the Russian state rather than the Russian nation (Tsygankov, 2003).

In contrast to the rising tide of liberal nationalism in post-Napoleonic Europe, Russia's ruling class conceptualized national identity and citizenship in a manner divorced from political participation, designed primarily to preserve state unity. The Crimean War (1853-1856) exposed critical weaknesses in Russia's state structure compere with Western Europe, particularly in military and technological capabilities. These developments precipitated a wave of reforms during Alexander Il's reign, most notably the 1861 emancipation of serfs, which was envisioned as a transformative step in governance (Kotkin, 2016).

As Lieven (1995) observes, these reforms aimed not to foster a national civic consciousness but rather to sustain centralized control across imperial territories (Lieven, 1995: 611). In this context, modernization in Russia unfolded as a state-centric project, reinforcing institutional authority over popular sovereignty.

In conclusion, the modernization efforts of the 19th century served not to advance Russia's nation-state formation, but rather to consolidate the centralization of its imperial structure.

National identity emerged not as an organic self-definition by society, but as a construction shaped by state imperatives of security, unity, and administrative integrity. Within this framework, the essential characteristics of modern nationstate building— particularly representative mechanisms based on singular ethnic affiliation and political participation models derived from this concept of ethnic belonging— developed only marginally in Russia due to its unique geographical conditions and historical trajectory.

III. Framework of the Concept of "Russian Nationalism" with a State-Centered Approach

Russian nationalism developed along fundamentally different lines from the classical nation-state paradigm that emerged in Western Europe. Whereas Western nationalism typically evolved within the topography of maritime empires, prioritizing popular sovereignty and representative mechanisms, Russian nationalism historically developed as a unique construct primarily concerned with preserving state existence, maintaining territorial integrity, and sustaining centralized control across multi-ethnic spaces.

Dominic Lieven (1995) argues that when examined within its imperial context, Russian nationalism carried primarily administrative and strategic rather than political significance. He maintains that Russia's vast geography and ethnic diversity led the state to employ the concept of *"nation"* not as a unifying ideal but as an instrument of control (Lieven, 1995: 612). This approach reflects a longstanding historical tradition that viewed the populace not as political agents but as organic components of the state apparatus. Richard Cracraft (1986)

encapsulates this dynamic as *"the state coming first, with society taking shape in its wake"* (Cracraft, 1986). This fundamental precedence gave rise to a form of nationalism rooted not in popular will but in political stability and administrative cohesion.

Although ethnic elements were occasionally incorporated into nationalist discourse, such rhetoric remained constrained by the structural reality of a multiethnic empire. Russia's expansive territorial boundaries encompassing diverse populations made it inherently difficult to base nationalism on ethnic foundations. Instead, the prevailing concept became that of "*a community united around the state*", with nationalism defined not through political participation but through unity and centralized order.

This state-centered structure has been preserved in the modern period. As Kotkin emphasizes, this model, which is based on the power and continuity of the state, pushes the existence of the people as public subjects to the background (Kotkin, 2016: 4-5). However, this situation has also had different advantages:

1) First, the existence of a strong central authority in a geography with wide and vulnerable borders made it possible to maintain political stability and territorial integrity.

2) This model, in which the state comes before the people, made it possible to keep the ethnic and cultural diversity within the borders of the empire under a single political structure.

3) Moreover, the top-down implementation of reforms enabled relatively rapid and uninterrupted modernization in military and bureaucratic spheres. This structure permitted the execution of strategic transformations without the necessity of securing popular approval.

The legitimacy of this structure among the populace also stems from the state's assumption of the role of order provider and protector. Particularly during crisis periods, strong centralized structures can create a security model against chaos.

The state has been conceived not merely as a governance tool enabling political participation, but as a protective structure ensuring regional stability. Undertaking this protective function is a task that cannot be revitalized through political participation by all segments of society. This situation results in nationalism being defined more by dependence on the state than by public participation. The state formations established in Russia's geography are built upon the foundation of the first Russian state structure, which emerged from the need for self-defense against the 13th-century Golden Horde and a collective societal consciousness.

In conclusion, when evaluated within its historical context, this state structure, while limiting the political subjectification of the people, offers strategic advantages in preserving integrity, enabling rapid institutional transformation, and creating resilience against external threats.

In this context, the Soviet Union represents a crucial historical juncture. According to Lieven, the structure of the Soviet Union should not be understood as a modern nation-state model, but rather as a reconfigured imperial framework reshaped through ideological parameters (Lieven, 1998).

The Soviet system positioned the individual as a component of a collective ideological project. Consequently, social belonging was not constructed through ethnically based national identity. This approach limits the development of individual civic consciousness. While this model managed to partially unify a multinational structure, the weakening of ideological bonds following the system's collapse led to identity conflicts. The nation-state model established after the Soviet Union's dissolution - coupled with the process of political and administrative restructuring - transformed Russian society's search for identity into a paradox.

Conclusion

This study has examined Russia's nation-state building process within the context of its historical development and geographical constraints. Russia's nation-state model differs significantly from its European counterparts, particularly in terms of territorial expanse, imperial legacy, and modernization dynamics.

During the Soviet period, the ideological discourse of unity developed over a multinational structure ensured short-term sustainability of this state system. However, the identity crisis that emerged following the system's collapse has complicated subsequent nation-state formation. Contemporary Russia's national identity definitions remain shaped by historical burdens.

In this context, the *"Russian Nation-State Paradox"* concept explains how Russia's geographical and historical necessities created a strong, centralized state tradition, while simultaneously preventing the institutionalization of an equally robust and inclusive foundation of belonging. Consequently, Russia's relationship with modern nation-state norms does not represent a compatibility issue, but rather reflects a unique development shaped by historical experience and political priorities.

Looking to the future, resolving Russia's Nation-State Paradox would require redefining historical memory and citizenship through an inclusive framework. Yet understanding Russia often proves more challenging than defining it; for Russia represents not merely a state or territory but also carries a deep historical burden. Moving forward under this burden will not be easy in perpetuity. As Alev Alatlı expressed: "Russia, Russia! You are like a helmet I wish to take off my head! (Alatlı, 2001).

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