



United in War, Divided in Celebration

Examining State and Nationalist Narratives in Russian
National Holiday Celebrations After the Full-Scale Invasion
of Ukraine

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Abstract

This thesis examines state and nationalist narratives regarding four Russian national holidays: Defender of the Fatherland Day, Victory Day, Russia Day, and National Unity Day. The study was motivated by the observation that existing scholarship on Russian commemorative politics focuses almost exclusively on Victory Day, practically ignoring other national holidays, the examination of which reveals deep contestation between the state and nationalist movements. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine intensified memory politics in Russia, making the period between February 2022 and February 2026 a particularly productive window for this kind of analysis. The data consists of Telegram posts published by twenty nationalist actors alongside Putin's official celebratory speeches and content disseminated by the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs.

This study demonstrates that national holidays reveal the values and key narratives of both state and nationalist actors, and that they are neither stable vehicles for collective memory nor simple instruments of state propaganda, but rather “unstable signifiers” whose academic value lies precisely in their instability, which gives scholars an opportunity to uncover the fractures within societies' commemorative landscapes. Applied to the Russian case, this approach reveals how questions of identity, historical continuity, and the Soviet legacy remain deeply unresolved within the nationalist camp.

Keywords: national holidays, narrative template, Defender of the Fatherland Day, Victory Day, Russia Day, National Unity Day, Russian nationalism, collective memory, historical continuity, Vladimir Putin.

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List of Abbreviations:

- **SVO** – Spetsial'naya Voyennaya Operatsiya (Special Military Operation)
- **GPW** – Great Patriotic War
- **ROA** – Russian Liberation Army (Russkaya Osvoboditel'naya Armiya)
- **RONA** – Russian Liberation People's Army
- **RDK** – Russian Volunteer Corps (Russky Dobrovolchesky Korpus)
- **RIM** – Russian Imperial Movement
- **RNE** – Russian National Unity (Russkoye Natsionalnoye Edinstvo)
- **DPNI** – Movement Against Illegal Immigration
- **NBP** – National Bolshevik Party
- **ESM** – Eurasian Youth Union
- **ROC** – Russian Orthodox Church
- **MoD** – Ministry of Defence
- **MFA** – Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- **FSB** – Federal Security Service
- **NATO** – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
- **PEN** – Privileged Event Narrative
- **NNP** – National Narrative Project

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Introduction

Vladimir Putin's regime increasingly relies on symbolic politics in order to unite the Russian people and consolidate support (Stewart 2021, 1877). This tendency escalated after February 24, 2022. Since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin's regime has been actively engaged in ideological work to maintain domestic support for the war (Laruelle 2024, 5). Throughout this century, shaping and strengthening Russian identity and nationalism has served as a useful strategy for the Kremlin to unite the public and consolidate support (Stewart 2021, 1877). However, the official narrative uses the term "patriotism" instead of "nationalism" (Fediunin 2022, 440). After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, ideological indoctrination escalated in several directions (Fomin 2025, 70). In Russia, national days serve as one of the main tools of memory politics, making them a central focus of this study. Even before the all-out war the Kremlin was using holidays to propagate national narratives, values and traditions to achieve its identity-building goals (Stewart 2021, 1877). The Kremlin's further engagement with the ideological field suggests that efforts to manipulate holidays as vehicles for identity-building have intensified since the full-scale invasion. This context explains why the research examines data from February 23, 2022, to February 24, 2026.

While national holidays can be "unstable signifiers", they serve as a "litmus paper" to identify values and national narratives of a state (McCrone and McPherson 2009, 219). This study is concerned with four Russian national holidays, which serve as vehicles for Putin's narratives: Defender of the Fatherland Day (February 23), Victory Day (May 9), Russia Day (June 12) and National Unity Day (November 4). While Russian memory politics and national narratives are a well-studied subject, there are relatively few studies concerned with national holidays other than Victory Day. All of these holidays fit directly into what James Wertsch termed (2002; 2021) the "Expulsion of Alien Enemies" schematic narrative template – or are made to fit by mnemonic actors. Narrative templates, one of the theoretical cornerstones of this study, play an important role in the formation of a community's national identity (Kaidesoja 2025, 45). Previously, Stewart (2021) examined how different narratives arise in different regions of Russia during holiday celebrations. This study takes a similar approach with regard to differences between state and nationalist narratives, analysing them within a single state-versus-nationalist context, examining how the Kremlin's nation-building process is challenged or backed by different actors.

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, Russian nationalist figures and pro-war bloggers became the only critics inside Russia whose voices were not suppressed; Even though they challenged the official narrative, they were eventually urging even more radical steps to be taken throughout the war (The Wall Street Journal 2022). But nationalist criticism of the Kremlin was not limited to calls for more radical action in Ukraine. Military bloggers often criticised corruption among Russian elites (Laruelle 2024, 24). However, within some nationalist groups, this divergence also appeared in their interpretations of the nature of the Russian state and questions of religion and ethnicity (Gaufman 2025, 23). The main platform for this criticism was Telegram – the social media which became increasingly popular in Russia and which played a key role in shaping the political narrative about Ukraine’s full scale invasion (Farbman 2023, 107). This platform became a “digital public square” (Gaufman 2025, 19). The shift, especially among far-right groups, occurred because Telegram was not known for significant cooperation with Russian security services (Gaufman 2025, 28). Telegram was integrated into the traditional Russian media and political space (Farbman 2023, 108). This is the reason why this study analyses texts which were published on Telegram channels of Russian nationalists.

This research examines holiday-related narratives not only of the Kremlin, but also of different types of Russian nationalist actors. The Russian nationalist camp is not united. On the contrary, Russian “nationalism is polyphonic” (Laruelle 2014, 59). It can be differentiated according to two main dimensions: ideological and relational (Fediunin 2022, 437). Laruelle’s (2019, 10) relational approach suggests the following differentiation: full-opposition nationalists; mid-opposition nationalists; co-opted statist nationalists; and “official” nationalists. Ideological typologies vary across scholars: Kolstø (2016a, 1) distinguishes between statist (*gosudarstvenniki*)/imperialists and ethnonationalists; Varga (2023, 40) identifies Aryanists, Eurasianists and Monarchists/Orthodox fundamentalists; and Kuzio (2022, 21) categorises them as Red (national Bolsheviks, “left patriots”), White (Tsarists and Orthodox fundamentalists) and Brown (fascists). These different typologies were used for the selection process of actors (see Table 1) who create nationalist discourse in contemporary Russia.

By examining holiday narratives, this research will build on previous studies of Russian nationalism while contributing to the understanding of important Russian national days –

particularly Russia Day and Defender of the Fatherland Day, which have largely remained outside scholarly attention.

Considering this context, this thesis seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What narratives do the Russian state and nationalist movements construct around national holidays, and how do they diverge in their visions of Russian identity, statehood, and historical continuity?
2. What does the comparison of state and nationalist commemorative narratives reveal about the status and function of Russia's national holidays – which holidays unite, which divide, and which are contested?
3. How is Wertsch's "Expulsion of Alien Enemies" narrative template deployed, modified, or contested in state and nationalist commemorative narratives?

In order to answer these questions, this research utilises the framework of Riessman's Thematic Narrative Analysis – a method specifically concerned with the content of narratives, rather than the forms and ways of their telling (Riessman 2008, 53-4). In cases where commemorative texts include images, this paper combines Riessman's approach with Kelly Guyotte's (2014) model of visual-verbal narrative analysis, which does not separate visual and verbal modes and views them as "commensurate" (Guyotte 2014, 7). Further details about these methods are discussed in the "Methodology" chapter.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

National Holidays – Unstable Signifiers

Every country needs national symbols like flags, emblems and anthems (Mønnesland 2012, 251). Anthony D. Smith in his *National Identity* proposed (1991) a list of these symbols, including not only flags, emblems and anthems, but even fairy tales, architecture style, legal procedures, etc. The major national symbol which was visibly absent from the list was the national day (Geisler 2009, 10). Such omission represents a “dominant scholarly view” that national holidays are weak identity markers (Omelicheva 2017, 441). As Michael E. Geisler formulates (2009, 14) on the examples of Russia, Australia, Germany and Japan, “*national holidays, more often than not, are relatively weak and extremely unstable signifiers of national identity*”. Indeed, national holidays are subject to editing, overwriting and erasure, they cannot be even materialized like other national symbols (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 7), but their significance in states’ “mythscape” and political functions cannot be disregarded (Omelicheva 2017, 441). Furthermore, even though holidays can be contested, they can be effective in concentrating time within space and cultivating a shared sense of identity that cuts across divisions of class, region, gender, religion, and race (Gillis 1994, 13-4).

Before moving forward, it must be noted that this study shares the definition of “national holidays” suggested by K. Gammelgaard and L. Šarić (2012, 6) – “*a day regarded as referring to a significant event in the past of the collective that observes the holiday*”. In other words, national holidays are grounded in historical narratives that commemorate events considered to be of crucial importance to a state (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 26). It is possible for countries to have more than one national holiday (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 11). Gammelgaard and Šarić underline (2012, 6) that this term does not refer to religious or international holidays. Overlap may exist between national and international holidays, if they are connected to events like World War II (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 6-7). Additionally, national day can be merged with a religious holiday (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 6).

Theorising through the lens of “banal nationalism”, the concept coined by Michael Billig (1995, 6), indeed, national holidays can be regarded as “unstable signifiers”. The theory of “banal nationalism” suggests that national symbols stabilise the sense of collective identity through redundancy and repetitiveness (Geisler 2009, 16). Unlike flags, anthems and

monuments, national holidays do not interfere in the everyday life of citizens (Geisler 2009, 16). Even more, national holidays can be contested, argued and fought over, claimed and disclaimed, reinvented and forgotten, which adds to their instability (Hauge 2012, 3). In the long run all national symbols can be edited, changed and erased, but flags, emblems, the currency, and the capital have greater national symbolic power and a more solid hold than national holidays (Geisler 2009, 15). As Geisler theorises (2009, 17) national days work in a different way because they are not ubiquitous; they do not go unnoticed and they compete for meaning with religious holidays. However, these are the exact important aspects of national holidays in the process of nation building. As Omelicheva (2017, 434) puts it: *“It is precisely this element of ‘calendrical coercion’ that can turn national holidays into a powerful tool in the national construction”*. Since these commemorative days are beyond “banality” of flags, emblems, anthems, etc., their reception is not subliminal (Geisler 2009, 17). They attract attention. Competition for meaning with religious holidays is another aspect which should not be disregarded. Geisler suggests (2009, 20) that national holidays partially evolved from the tradition of religious “holy days”, but instead of transcendent meaning, they serve the secular purpose of nationalism, which can be described as a “civil religion”. Unlike religious commemoration, which is rooted in faith and transcendental simultaneity, national holidays are anchored in a past that remains inherently inaccessible to the present. Therefore, national holidays require an artificially constructed bridge to generate a comparable sense of pervasiveness and simultaneity, and it is history that assumes this bridging function (Geisler 2009, 20). Anniversaries, among other means of commemoration, are “illusions of eternity” (Nora 1996, 6).

However, how objective can the history be? The historical facts are not always agreed upon, they can be contested and reinterpreted (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 21). They “acquire their credibility from social consensus fashioned by time, negotiation, and corroboration” (Walton 2002, 289). To put it simply, it is unclear what occurred and what has been said to occur (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 21). Historical events and figures can be used to forge narratives of a common past, they can be used to link the past to the present to create continuity, which is a vital part of nations’ unifying narratives (Rodell 2009, 127). This whole context is connected to the concept of collective memory which will be discussed in a separate part of this section. When people talk about national holidays, they create a certain meaningful structure of the past, which can differ substantially from the actual events they refer to (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 22). However, objective or subjective, this sense of

historical continuity gives national days the characteristic which is common for this kind of commemoration dates – “they are key markers in national biography” – they can separate nations’ histories from one another (McCrone and McPherson 2009, 213). Or, in other words, national holidays are adopted by nations in order to “delimit their unique identity” (Cerulo 1995, 57). Remembering historical events connected to statehood creates a sense of the state’s continuity and reinforces people’s identity as a unified group (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 26).

National Holidays and Politics

While national holidays are meant to unite people, they can also create divisions, since not everyone agrees with what is being celebrated or how it is being celebrated. Historical narratives, on which national holidays are based, can be challenged or reinterpreted by community members (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 26). The importance of an event itself is emphasized by subjects who hold power – they are the ones who select which national holidays to celebrate and when, usually unilaterally (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 26). Understanding whose memory and whose narrative shapes these holidays is therefore crucial. It is less important what days are chosen to celebrate and greater importance lies in the fact of who they are chosen by and why (McCrone and McPherson 2009, 212). However, even in the absence of direct public engagement in the selection of national holidays, the events they commemorate must be sufficiently significant and widely embedded in collective memory (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 26).

However, even if the official narrative is as uncontroversial as possible, it can still be challenged by members of society. When a struggle arises over a national day, it is often politically motivated, and sides aim to achieve political outcomes (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 16). Such disputes are far from trivial – at their core lies a fundamental question of who gets to control the national narrative; This is precisely why regimes have historically exploited national holidays as vehicles for their ideology (McCrone and McPherson 2009, 214). Holidays and other forms of symbolic politics serve as especially powerful instruments for non-democratic regimes seeking to establish and reinforce their legitimacy through the construction of national identity (Stewart 2021, 1878). In this political context national holidays do not only serve as domestic tools but they can assist the state in its needs of international recognition (Omelicheva 2017, 435). These days also can serve as a means of projecting a nation’s values, attitudes, and strengths onto the international stage (Salmond

2009, xiii). However, holidays not only create opportunities for authorities to promote their narrative, but they also create an opportunity for people to challenge or alter the official message and when the regime is no longer in control of alternative narratives, “the potential for competitive nation-building arises” (Stewart 2021, 1903). This political side of national days make them part of what Duncan S. Bell called “mythscape” – “extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of peoples memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly” (Bell 2003, 66). In this context national holidays “are key markers of national narratives in which political actors are constantly engaged” (McCrone and McPherson 2009, 219).

Collective Memory

Each group has its own distinctive collective memory (Halbwachs 1980, 78), which means that “*there are as many memories as there are groups*” (Nora 1996, 3). Both groups and individuals can maintain the sense of sameness and continuity across time and space through remembering, while the established identity defines what will be remembered (Gillis 1994, 3). Yet memory is caught up in the process of constant evolution; it can become a subject of appropriation and manipulation, and it can be forgotten and reawakened after a long period of time (Nora 1996, 3). Therefore, neither memories, nor identities, which are mutually constitutive, can be regarded as fixed and objective things; on the contrary, they are subjective phenomena (Gillis 1994, 3).

However, the importance of the collective memory lies in its subjectivity, since it gives us a perspective on how groups see themselves from within – “It provides the group a self-portrait that unfolds through time; since it is an image of the past, and allows the group to recognize itself throughout the total succession of images” (Halbwachs 1980, 86). Collective memory is broadly defined as a socially shared representation of the past that serves a threefold function: it constitutes group identity, gives meaning to present conditions, and frames the group’s vision of the future (Šarić 2012, 36). Memory will cease to exist if a group stops supporting its sequence of events and if that past becomes irrelevant to its sense of continuity (Halbwachs 1980, 79). In this context, collective memory is not an inherent commodity of a group but it is a socially constructed discourse (Sherman 1994, 186). It is created through language, rituals, commemorative practices and by selection of memory sites (Šarić 2012, 36). Therefore, commemoration itself gives collective memory “social substance” (Sherman 1994, 186).

Collective memory can be formed in two ways: through direct participation in events, or through cultural tools that distribute memory among those with no direct experience of the past (Šarić 2012, 42). In the latter case, history serves as a bridge between past and present, preserving a sense of continuity – though it retains only those aspects that are of interest to contemporary society (Halbwachs 1980, 79–80). As discussed in previous parts, subjective use of history fulfils this bridging function in the case of national holidays. Collective memory is a dimension of political power (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 24). Groups in power control and shape collective memory in accordance with their aims, often for instrumental reasons such as the legitimization of power (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 8; Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 24). National holidays, as vehicles of collective memory, are similarly selective and controlled (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 24). Since collective memory is shaped through texts and other semiotic products (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 25), and media is the primary site of their production and dissemination (Šarić 2012, 42), those who control the media effectively control collective memory.

Schematic Narrative Template and National Narrative Project

The scholarship of James Wertsch (2002; 2021) serves as the conceptual bridge between collective memory and Russian nationalism for this research. In order to speak about nationalism in Russia through the lens of memory studies, it is important to understand Schematic Narrative Templates (2002) and National Narrative Projects (2021). These concepts explain the mechanisms through which collective memory operates in the Russian context.

Wertsch differentiates (2002, 60) between what he calls specific narratives and schematic narrative templates. Specific narratives are “*surface texts that include concrete information about the particular times, places, and actors involved in an event*” (Wertsch 2021, 77). They are concerned with “mid-level” events, which can be disseminated through school textbooks or other types of textual channels (Wertsch 2004, 51). As Wertsch’s analysis demonstrates, specific narratives can be framed through different ideological lenses – Soviet-era textbooks, for example, defined World War II narratives through Marxist-Leninist theory. (Kaidesoja 2025, 47; Wertsch 2002, 107). In contrast to specific narratives, schematic narrative templates “are largely devoid of concrete detail about the time and place of events and about most actors” (Wertsch 2021, 78). As Wertsch explains (2004, 51): “*schematic narrative templates involve a much more abstract level of representation and*

provide a narrative framework that is compatible with many instantiations in specific narratives". These templates are storylines about the national past that underlie many specific narratives and play a significant role in shaping a community's national identity (Kaidesoja 2025, 45). Narrative templates can differ based on cultural and narrative traditions, hence they are not universal and could be shaped differently in different contexts; furthermore, narrative templates "*are not readily available to consciousness*", which means that people can be unaware of how collective remembering is shaped by them (Wertsch 2002, 62). The abstractness of narrative templates gives them another important ability to persist even if specific narratives go through fundamental changes, including disappearance from collective remembering (Wertsch 2002, 176). From this, one might assume that specific stories do not influence templates, yet this would be a misconception – "narrative templates are the traces left behind by countless efforts to construct the meaning of past events using specific narratives" (Wertsch 2021, 133). Moreover, unlike abstract narrative templates, since specific narratives are connected to actual people and events, they are powerful mnemonic mediators as they can "*pack more of an emotional punch than a schematic form*" (Wertsch 2021, 134).

Wertsch's scholarship has great importance for this study not only because his works include theoretical frameworks which are useful for memory and narrative studies, but also because they are concerned with Russian national narratives. He developed (2002, 93) a Russian narrative template titled "triumph-over-alien-forces", which he later renamed (2021, 100) the "Expulsion of Alien Enemies" narrative template. This template consists of four parts: (1) an "initial situation" in which Russia is peaceful and not interfering with others; (2) "trouble", in which a foreign enemy viciously attacks Russia without provocation; (3) Russia comes under existential threat and nearly loses everything as the enemy attempts to destroy it as a civilization; (4) through heroism and exceptionalism, against all odds, and acting alone, Russia triumphs and succeeds in expelling the foreign enemy (Wertsch 2021, 100). This template forms the general plotline for important events from Russian history, including the Mongol, Swedish, Napoleonic, and Nazi German invasions (Wertsch 2004, 58). However, not all events are equal, and there are some specific stories – privileged event narratives (PEN) – which carry greater emotional force and are closely bound to the underlying narrative template; in Russia's case, World War II, or more precisely the myth of the Great Patriotic War, is the privileged event narrative, which combines an emotionally charged narrative with the "Expulsion of Alien Enemies" template (Wertsch 2021, 135). As

Wertsch notes (2021, 135), “*Members of a national community share a tendency to accept a PEN as an obvious lens for viewing the past, present, and future*”; hence, in the Russian mnemonic community, the Great Patriotic War is used as a lens through which occurring events are viewed.

The “Expulsion of Alien Enemies” narrative template has several other notable aspects which are important for this research in order to understand how the Russian state and nationalist discourses can differ. While the template is ubiquitous, it is simultaneously flexible and can be reinterpreted, since it is not as concrete as specific narratives; therefore, the notion of “alien” is not limited only to non-Russian or non-Soviet actors, but can include actors who at first glance are Russians – one of “Us” – yet in fact are “traitors” (Wertsch 2002, 94). Another important aspect is that the “Expulsion of Alien Enemies” template carries an element of victimisation, since it portrays the Russian state as a target of unprovoked aggression. It should also be emphasised that alternative narrative templates exist, such as the “Russian Empire” narrative template, though it is often employed among the peoples of former Soviet republics rather than within Russia itself (Wertsch 2002, 94).

Besides specific narratives, narrative templates, and privileged event narratives, Wertsch developed (2021) another form of narrative – the National Narrative Project (NNP), which, as he explains (2021, 184), is an “*overall biography or life history of a national community that is directed toward an aspiration or ideal that guides a national community’s understanding of itself*”. The “Expulsion of Alien Enemies” narrative template serves as a template rather than an NNP, because all the events it encapsulates have an ending, while a narrative project does not, since it is “*an aspiration or a narrative quest toward a general telos*” (Wertsch 2021, 191). In this context, it is important to understand the concept of the “Russian Idea” – the late 19th and early 20th century intellectual debates that focused “*on the idea that the essence of the Russian nation could be characterized by certain timeless features such as messianism, Orthodox spirituality, and a sense of harmony or community (sobornost)*”, which later expanded to other debates on national identity (Laruelle 2019, 8-9). Wertsch suggests (2021, 191) that the Russian NNP derives precisely from the discussions of the “Russian Idea”, which focus on Russia’s unique spiritual mission. One such manifestation is the narrative of “Moscow as the Third Rome”, which originates from the writings of Monk Filofei of Pskov and regards Moscow and the “Tsardom” as the last bastion of Orthodoxy (Wertsch 2021, 191). The “Third Rome” concept represents the

messianic consciousness of Russian nationalism (Duncan 2000, 55). This idea is part of Russia's self-imagination as a bastion against what Russians perceive as moral degeneracy and decay in the West, and "*it provides the basis for a narrative quest in pursuit of a unique spiritual mission*" (Wertsch 2021, 191). Framing this spiritual mission as an NNP suggests that Russian nationalism is constructed not only through the victimisation template, but also through a teleological self-understanding of Russia's moral mission. While it is structurally and conceptually different from the "Expulsion of Alien Enemies" narrative template, these two structures do not contradict each other; instead, they interact. This particular NNP points to a final goal that can be used to rationalise Russian suffering at the hands of alien enemies (Wertsch 2021, 191-2).

Brief Background of Russian Nationalism

Important works of recent decades concerned with Russian nationalism (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2016; Laruelle 2019; Kuzio 2022) offer different understandings of the relationship between the Russian state and nationalism. Nevertheless, they provide an enormous theoretical and empirical foundation for studying the concept of Russian nationalism. Although typologies of authors vary, two broad directions of Russian nationalism are identified: statism, which can also be framed as imperialism, and ethnonationalism; while the former are interested in a large and strong state, the latter are concerned with ethnic identity and racial purity (Kolstø 2016a, 1). Such a framing suggests the existence of imperial nationalism, which is not an oxymoron in Russian reality (Pain 2016, 46). Statist nationalists label themselves as "patriots" (Fediunin 2022, 437). While these two opposing types of nationalism seem to be contradictory, "the main ideologists of nationalism and politics can simultaneously use both imperialist and ethno-nationalist arguments" (Laruelle 2014, 59). Kuzio (2022, 134) even suggests that under Putin's regime Tsarist imperial, White Russian émigré and Soviet great power nationalism were all integrated.

Ideological borders between Russian nationalist groups are often vague and their camp is divided. This is why Fediunin (2022, 437) prefers to say "Russian nationalisms" instead of "Russian nationalism". Since the 1990s, the existing gap between Russian ethos and ethnos caused nationalist and public debates about the civic "*rossiiskii*" and ethnic "*russskii*" identities (Fediunin 2022, 438). After the fall of the USSR, the word "*rossiiskii*" was introduced by Boris Yeltsin's government as an equivalent of the multi-ethnic "Soviet people", in order to include all ethnicities that were part of the newly formed Russian

Federation (Blakkisrud 2016, 249). Since then, this concept has been contested by numerous nationalists, for whom this term represents an attempt to dissolve ethnic identity into a multinational melting pot, instead of recognising the special status of ethnic Russians (Fediunin 2022, 440).

After the fall of the Soviet Union, different nationalist actors and groups emerged in Russia. The 1990s saw the formation of a red-brown coalition against Boris Yeltsin – an alliance of openly fascist movements such as Russian National Unity (RNE - *Russkoie natsionalnoie edinstvo*) and adherents of National Bolshevism such as Gennady Zyuganov's Communist Party of the Russian Federation (Kuzio 2022, 147). Among the other visible forces was the National Bolshevik Party (NBP), or *Natsboly* – a radical movement that lacked anti-Semitic narrative, yet was inspired by fascism and Bolshevism, and its ideology was solely grounded in the worldviews of its creator – Eduard Limonov (Laruelle 2021, 161). Militarism was one of the main characteristics of such groups. For example, RNE fighters participated in the defence of the White House on behalf of the rebel parliamentarians during the 1993 constitutional crisis (Laruelle 2019, 157).

From the 1990s Russia faced labour shortages, which led to a growing demand for guest workers from the “near abroad” – former Soviet republics (Kolstø 2016, 4). Simultaneously, more people from the “inner abroad”, i.e. republics like Chechnya, Dagestan, Yakutia, etc., moved to major cities, which were homogeneously ethnic Russian (Kolstø 2016a, 4). In Russian nationalist discourse, people from the “inner abroad” are often not distinguished from labour immigrants from the “near abroad”, and both groups are labelled as “aliens” threatening the ethnic Russian character of these cities (Kolstø 2016a, 4). In the 2000s this tendency was followed by the rise of Aryanist skinhead and neo-Nazi movements such as RNE's splinter Slavic Union (*Slavianskii Soyuz*, SS) and the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) (Varga 2023, 42). While radical nationalist movements of the 1990s were interested in participating in military standoffs at home or abroad, skinhead and neo-Nazi gangs brought unprecedented hate-motivated violence to the streets of cities like Moscow and Saint Petersburg. From 2004 to 2014, far-right affiliated casualties reached at least 497 dead (Varga 2023, 43). Such groups harboured anti-Kremlin narratives and in order to control the nationalist agenda, the Kremlin manipulated one of the radical groups – Russian Image (*Russkii Obraz*) (Fediunin 2022, 446). The government's approach to far-right groups changed after the 2010 Manezhnaia

Square riots, which was the largest riot of that period, accompanied by violence against the police and the arrest of thousands (Kolstø 2016a, 2). The crackdown on far-right nationalists intensified.

Parallel to skinhead violence, another far-right movement was gaining momentum. In the first half of the 2000s, Aleksandr Dugin, a former member of 1980s far-right movement Pamiat and the Natsboly, formed the Eurasian Youth Union (ESM) (Varga 2023, 45). Eurasianism developed in the 1920s-30s among Russian émigré circles in Europe. It is an anti-Western ideology suggesting that Russia represents a unique Eurasian civilisation, and that the peoples of the former empire and the former USSR are destined to be bound together under the rule of the Russian “big brother” (Laruelle 2019, 39, 43). Eurasianists took a mostly statist agenda from the beginning. ESM was among the organisers of the first far-right march on Unity Day in 2005, when the event was called the Right-Wing March (Laruelle 2019, 113). Yet in 2006, because of DPNI’s anti-Kremlin stance and different political agenda, Eurasianists stopped participating in the march, which was now renamed as Russkii marsh – the Russian March (Varga 2023, 45).

The war in Donbas turned out to be a significant blow for the already weakened Aryanist camp and wide nationalist coalition called *Russkie* (Russians); it drove a wedge between pro-Ukrainian groups and supporters of Russian expansionism (Laruelle 2019, 167; Varga 2023, 44-5). During this period, Eurasianists, tsarists, and Orthodox fundamentalist movements were largely unaffected and gained momentum (Varga 2023, 45-6). The so-called “Russian Spring” – the military aggression against Ukraine – was popular among nationalists and was supported by groups with different ideologies (Verkhovsky 2016, 97). Russian proxy paramilitary groups that fought against Ukraine included former and active members of RNE, Slavic Union, DPNI, *Natsboly* and the International Eurasian Movement (Kuzio 2022, 195). Some units, such as the newly appeared Rusich group, had neo-Nazi characteristics (Varga 2023, 47). However, some Russian neo-Nazis supported the Euromaidan movement and the Revolution of Dignity, and during the war they joined the Ukrainian Right Sector and the Azov Battalion (Laruelle 2019, 206–7).

The war in Donbas gave a platform to previously unknown actors within Russian nationalism. The most famous face of the war became Igor Girkin (Strelkov) – a former Russian Federal Security Service officer who led the Russian proxy unit taking over Sloviansk during the spring of 2014 (Meduza 2023). The Orthodox businessman

Konstantin Malofeev was among the key players who financed Russian proxies; well known for his tsarist sentiments, he is the founder of the Tsargrad Society – an organisation which claims to be the heir to the Black Hundreds (Fediunin 2022, 441; Laruelle 2019, 203–4). Yet it took only a year for nationalists to realise that they and the Kremlin had fundamentally different aims. The Kremlin removed Strelkov from his pedestal and silenced radicals connected to the Novorossiia cause (Laruelle 2019, 209). By the early 2020s, most Russian nationalist groups were disillusioned with Putin’s regime (Varga 2023, 47).

An absolute majority of Russian nationalists celebrated the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and embraced it as the long-awaited moment (Laruelle 2022). During the first years of the full-scale war, a new form of Russian nationalism – Z-patriotism – was born (Laruelle 2024, 25), developed by Telegram military bloggers. While this doctrine is connected to the state ideology, it maintains some level of autonomy, spreading criticism of state structures and corruption (Laruelle 2024, 25). However, Z-patriotism cannot be viewed as a unified movement; it is a form of expression rather than a new ideological current. Nationalist discourse on social media, which focused on two broad directions – the war and anti-migrant rhetoric – moved into the mainstream (Gaufman 2025, 24). Anti-migration movements such as Russkaya Obshchina (Russian Community) entered the nationalist scene, which marked the return of organised anti-migrant movements – this time aligned with the government (BBC 2024). Yet, as this research illustrates, the dissatisfaction of different Russian nationalist groups and actors with the Kremlin, its handling of the war, and its memory politics remains prominent and continues to grow.

Putin and Nationalism

In modern Russia nationalism is ubiquitous (Fediunin 2022, 437). Since the full scale invasion of Ukraine began, Putin, other high ranking officials and the state media have set their rhetoric towards Ukraine to be similar to that of well-known nationalist actors like Aleksandr Dugin (Kuzio 2023, 33). However, in official discourse the Kremlin avoids the term “nationalism”, preferring instead to espouse “patriotism” (Fediunin 2022, 440). The only time Putin used this term positively was in 2014 when he proclaimed that he was “*the biggest nationalist in Russia*”, while giving his reinterpretation of this term, suggesting that “*the greatest and most appropriate kind of nationalism is when you act and conduct policies that will benefit the people*” (Putin 2014). He further added that if nationalism is transformed

into intolerance and chauvinism, it can be destructive for Russia, which he described as a “*multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state*”. Yet the full picture might be more complex. The official Russian discourse is often contradictory, simultaneously drawing on civic, Eurasianist, and ethnonationalist frameworks (Kolstø 2016b, 38). Even though the Kremlin avoids nationalist rhetoric, it never denies the special role of the Russian (*Russkii*) nation: “*Russian world and Russia itself do not and cannot exist without Russians as an ethnicity, without the Russian people. This statement does not contain any claim to superiority, exclusivity or chosenness. This is simply a fact*” (Putin 2023a).

Some scholars, such as Mikhail Suslov, frame Putin’s ideology as an exclusive concept of Putinism – a mixture of right-wing communitarianism and populism containing fascist elements (Suslov 2024, 16). However, it remains a debated question whether Putin’s regime actually has any coherent ideology (Kiryukhin 2025, 269). Nevertheless, it is evident that after the 2011-12 Bolotnaya protests, the Kremlin adopted a new political strategy that relied on symbolic politics, focused on traditional values, and pursued an opportunistic foreign policy, all of which depended on media propaganda even more than during the early 2000s (Sharafutdinova 2022, 267). Sergei Fediunin (2022, 440) termed this whole discourse “official nationalism”, which combined the ideological content of conservatism and anti-Westernism. This official nationalism can borrow its content from contradictory “civilisational grammars”, framing Russia either as a European country that does not follow the Western model of development, or as a non-European, distinct – Slavic, Orthodox, or Eurasian – civilisation. What unites both narratives is their anti-Westernism (Fediunin 2022, 442). Putin’s speech of 18 March 2014, celebrating the annexation of Crimea – in which he framed the peninsula as “*native Russkii soil*” and claimed that the “*Russkii*” people were the largest divided nation – is sometimes described as “a hallmark of officialdom’s endorsement of Russian ethno-nationalism” (Teper 2018, 77). Fediunin, however, evaluates this case differently, arguing that Putin “*played the nationalism card*” in order to renew his political legitimacy; in this framework, Russian official nationalism is not an absolute ideology but “a technology of power that serves to legitimise the current regime and to generate mass loyalty to it” (Fediunin 2022, 442).

From time to time, Putin’s rhetoric has become more hardline and closer to ultranationalist discourse – not in relation to Russia’s domestic national question, but specifically toward Ukraine. By 2022 Putin had embraced ultranationalist narratives and “*upheld Dugin’s call to eradicate those holding an ethnic Ukrainian identity and implement the Russian imperial*

nationalist destruction of the Ukrainian state and annex all or some of its territory” (Kuzio 2023, 33). While during previous years Putin portrayed Russia as a home to different nations and stressed its multiethnic aspects, in 2021 he openly doubted the nationhood of a neighbouring country, claiming that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people – a single whole” (Putin 2021).

Methodology

The research is using the framework of Thematic Narrative Analysis as its core methodological approach. As Catherine Riessman explains, this method is focused on content of narratives, about ““what” is said, rather than “how,” “to whom,” or “for what purposes””. (Riessman 2008, 53-4). In other words, this approach, even though occasionally bearing in mind particular choice of words, generally disregards language, form and interaction (Riessman 2008, 59). Since this study has to analyse a vast number of Telegram posts, it is important to keep the focus on the narrative content rather than get into subjects that should be covered by other research. Thematic analysis can be used with a wide range of narrative texts (Riessman 2008, 54). Another important aspect is that, through this framework, researchers can retain the influence of previous knowledge, existing theories, and the aims of the study (Meraz et al. 2019, 3). Since “In Riessman’s thematic analysis, the story is kept intact and not fragmented into codes or segments” (Meraz et al. 2019, 3), the coding process of this study is focused on identifying recurring narratives that appear in the data, instead of separately analysing each and every sentence.

Although Riessman (2008) did not specify in detail the steps for conducting thematic narrative analysis, the data processing approach in this study is inspired by the examples provided in her book and consists of seven steps: 1) contextual preparation – familiarisation with the political context, actors and theoretical framework; 2) first reading of data while taking notes; 3) second reading and initial coding; 4) creation of a codebook (see Table 2) and organization of codes into thematic categories; 5) comparison of state and nationalist narratives; 6) identification of findings; 7) checking of findings against the theoretical framework. Thematic categories were initially constructed deductively, based on existing theories of Russian nationalism; however, several additional themes emerged inductively from the data itself.

During the past decades, social media contributed to the rise of “small stories” (Georgakopoulou 2017, 314). Labov’s (1972) influential model, that “privileged” (Georgakopoulou, 2015, p.255) long and uninterrupted narratives, led scholars to overlook such material (Georgakopoulou et al. 2023, 6). As Georgakopoulou (2017, 314) explains, “definition of small stories includes a range of activities that conventional narrative analysts have been reluctant to include in their analytical remit: from literally small to fragmented and open-ended tellings that exceed the confines of a single speech event”. Furthermore, small stories “frequently emerge as the counter-stories, the stories that are not encouraged or allowed in specific environments” (Georgakopoulou 2015, 263), which is an important aspect for this paper. Therefore, such non-linear and fragmented texts are included in the dataset. However, this study utilizes small stories as a concept, rather than a methodology.

The dataset of this study includes not only texts but also several images – most of them are holiday celebration posters, often with commemorative and celebratory texts on them. Visual material can be analysed alongside written text and interpreted together (Riessman 2008, 141). Although “there is not a singular “correct” reading of an image” and “Images may be composed to accomplish specific aims, but audiences can read the images differently than an artist intended” (Riessman 2008, 179), the context of visual data which this paper is dealing with is heavily fixed, since they are published on holidays, which they celebrate or denounce. Riessman’s (2008) approach aligns with Kelly Guyotte’s (2014, 9) visual-verbal narrative analysis, which is used as the practical procedure for cases where commemorative posts include visual material alongside written text. This method does not examine visual and verbal modes separately; instead, it views them as “commensurate” (Guyotte 2014, 7). Instead of understanding what meanings images and texts transmit individually, visual-verbal narrative analysis prioritizes the dialogic relationship between both modes (Guyotte 2014, 9). Therefore, during the reading and coding stages: 1) images are analysed based on their content – what symbols and historical references are depicted; 2) it is examined whether an image reinforces or contradicts the textual message; 3) it is examined how the combined text and image function within the overall commemorative narrative. These steps follow Guyotte’s (2014) approach, according to which visual and verbal materials are not separated into different analytic stages and instead the process cycles “within and through” both modes “in a nonlinear manner” (Guyotte 2014, 10).

Data Selection

Data that are analysed in this paper were selected after a contextual preparation. As a first step, Telegram channels were chosen based on their role in Russian nationalist discourse. The dataset incorporates military bloggers, nationalist thinkers and movements as well as military units with ultranationalist background that represent different types of nationalism. The aim was not to include only influential channels but those actors and movements that have less social media reach, yet are involved in the ongoing war in Ukraine and play their part in Russian nationalist circles. This approach creates an opportunity to cover not only mainstream Russian nationalism but actors with marginalised ideologies, such as Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK) – a unit fighting on the Ukrainian side.

During this initial process, alongside contextual knowledge, the method of Peeters and Willaert (2022) was used, which emphasises Telegram’s message forwarding function. This approach treats each act of forwarding as evidence of a connection between Telegram channels and, moreover, suggests that relations between channels can be modelled as networks (Willaert and Tuters 2025, 4). While this framework is generally used to inductively build datasets by discovering connections between channels or to study the information flow among users (Willaert and Tuters 2025, 4), in this research the mentioned approach served as a filtering tool. Although some channels were found through this method, others were excluded precisely because of extensive message forwarding from already included actors. After the selection of channels, the calendar tool of Telegram was used to find posts which were published on or prior to specific national holidays. Based on the theoretical background, it was theorised in advance that the most relevant national days for this study would be Defender of the Fatherland Day, Victory Day, Russia Day and National Unity Day. A surface-level reading of posts on several Telegram channels confirmed that the aforementioned holidays play the biggest part in Russian nationalist discourse, as they were celebrated or denounced, while other days were mostly ignored.

Although this research is focused on Telegram posts, the dataset combines different types of media, as the posts themselves contain not only published texts but also shared articles and images. Only transcripts of Vladimir Putin’s congratulatory speeches are taken directly from the Kremlin’s website and not from social media. This decision can be explained by the fact that the mentioned texts are either only partially published on the Kremlin’s Telegram channel or disseminated by ministries as videos. In order to clearly identify state narratives,

Telegram posts of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence are analysed alongside Putin's speeches. These institutions were selected due to their central role in shaping and communicating official discourse, especially in the light of the ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

The study is concerned with Telegram posts which were published on the aforementioned holidays between February 23, 2022 and February 24, 2026 – four years of the all-out offensive. The timeframe of data examined in this paper was chosen based on the premise that during wartime states intensify memory politics, as has been empirically documented (Feklyunina et al. 2025) in the Russian context – which is an extreme example of militarization of historical memory. As it was stated, the starting point of the data collection period is February 23, 2022 instead of the actual day of the full-scale invasion, which is February 24. This decision was made because this date marks the Defender of the Fatherland Day. Since it nearly coincides with the beginning of the full-scale invasion, it is the only national holiday for which the analysis includes data from 2026 as well.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First of all, while the research is concerned with the content of existing nationalist narratives, the extent to which these narratives are shared among the citizens of Russia cannot be measured. This question, which falls beyond the scope of a narrative study, can only be answered by fundamentally different, quantitative methods such as large-scale surveys.

Another important limitation is the fact that the paper cannot address questions concerning the political conditions under which nationalist actors are allowed to criticise Putin's regime and circulate counter-narratives. Narrative studies of holiday celebration texts cannot answer questions that are important for seeing the broader picture of the Russian nationalism from the perspective of Russian studies. That is why the study addresses what actors say and does not attempt to explain why they are permitted to say it. This research cannot determine if particular nationalist actors have powerful connections in state security services or in a criminal world who would act as their protectors. While some actors analysed in this paper could be used as tools by the Federal Security Service (FSB) and could be part of the Kremlin's "managed nationalism" (Horvath 2014) approach, such questions lie in the domains of investigative journalism and political sociology. Finally, while the study

examines texts disseminated by nationalists, the Kremlin and two ministries, it turns a blind eye to the Russian state media. Considering the state's control over the press inside the country, it could be suggested that the state media repeats the Kremlin's line. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to see how they add to the official narrative and whether any contradictions could be discovered. However, including such data in the study would require a different methodological approach and more time.

Analysis

Defender of the Fatherland Day

Celebration of February 23 traces its roots to early 1920s. During those years it was called Red Army Day. Yet the background of this holiday is not vivid. This day, which coincided with the beginning of the February revolution (February 23 before the calendar reform, March 8 in the renewed calendar) was celebrated as Red Army Day at least from 1922, even though the Red Army was officially established in January 1918 (Wood 2017, 738). It seems that the decision to celebrate this event on February 23 was a "rather random choice of date" (Efremova 2014, 93). According to Wood, in 1919, the Red Army Day and The Day of the Red Present, which "had been created to encourage volunteers in the rear to collect warm clothes and food for soldiers at the front", were combined due to organisational issues (Wood 2017, 738-9). During the following years this holiday was accompanied by another historical myth claiming that February 23 marked the Red Army's victory over the German army at Narva and Pskov, which was a misconception because in reality Bolshevik troops faced several routs and the Germans occupied aforementioned cities and delivered their ultimatum regarding Ukraine's independence and the secession of Batumi and Kars to Turkey (Wood 2017, 737-8). Around the 1970s Red Army Day became increasingly known as "men's holiday" to "balance" March 8 (Wood 2017, 739). In the 1940s Red Army Day was renamed to Soviet Army and Navy Day. After the fall of USSR, in the 1990s it became known as Defender of the Fatherland Day, in 2002, under Putin's rule February 23 became a day off and in 2006 the words "Victory Day of the Red Army over the Kaiser's troops of Germany (1918)" were removed from its official name (Efremova 2014, 93).

Analysing data connected to Defender of the Fatherland Day demonstrated the existence of six general points of divergence: (1) the legitimacy of the date – why different actors accept

or reject the day; (2) narratives regarding historical continuity – which events and historical periods are rejected or selectively chosen; (3) ownership of the holiday – whom the holiday represents and honours, and who should be celebrated on this day; (4) war framing – how the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is portrayed in celebratory texts. Additionally, similar to other holiday narratives, the February 23 discourse also includes debates about the nature of Russianness and the dichotomy of civic and ethnic identities.

Every year Putin delivers a congratulatory speech on Defender of the Fatherland Day. These texts not only are projections of Moscow's militaristic attitudes but they also serve as "litmus papers" (McCrone and McPherson 2009, 219) for the current nation-building process. In the Kremlin's narrative, Defender of the Fatherland Day incorporates all other values and historical events which are frequently mentioned during other holidays. While this day does not mark any significant date, which is essential for national holidays (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 6), it perfectly fits within the schematic narrative template of Russia proposed by Wertsch (2002). Unlike regular Days of Military Honour, this holiday does not mark any significant event, but includes all of them, portraying how Russia fought against different kinds of threatening "alien forces". In his 2022 congratulatory speech Putin said: "*We are proud of the many generations of its defenders: the guards of Alexander Nevsky and Dmitry Donskoy, the warriors of Minin and Pozharsky and the heroes of Poltava and Borodino, Stalingrad and the unstoppable assault on Berlin*" (Putin 2022a). This line evokes the "Expulsion of Alien Enemies" template, referencing how Russians expelled the Teutonic Order, Mongols, Poles, Swedes, French, and Germans. Moreover, it demonstrates how the Kremlin sees a chain of historical continuation spanning from the Novgorod Republic to the modern Russian Federation. In commemorative texts on Defender of the Fatherland Day, Putin evokes the same narrative template in regard to Ukraine's full-scale invasion, framing the act of aggression as a defensive battle against "neo-Nazism" which endangers Russian "historical lands" and its people: "*Our troops are heroically fighting the neo-Nazism that has taken root in Ukraine, protecting our people in our historical lands*" (Putin 2023b). Alongside efforts to strengthen the image of an uninterrupted past of Russian statehood in collective memory, texts disseminated on Defender of the Fatherland Day can also serve as vehicles for national identity reflection by framing Russia as a multi-ethnic nation. In this narrative, Russia is multinational and for many centuries different peoples have been uniting for its defence: "*[we] know that throughout history, people of different ethnicities and confessions have risen to defend the country*" (Putin 2026). Media and texts disseminated by

the Defence and Foreign Affairs ministries closely follow the Kremlin's framing of the holiday. Unlike Victory Day and National Unity Day, the official narrative stays selective in regard to the origins of the celebration, ignoring its background. Only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs briefly mentioned the prehistory of Defender of the Fatherland Day (MFA 2025).

Of the four holidays this study is concerned with, the narrative regarding Defender of the Fatherland Day is the most contested between the state and nationalists. The idea of celebrating this holiday on the former Red Army Day faces backlash from groups whose national narrative is based on tsarism or more specifically White Army glorification. They reject the Soviet past and portray Bolshevism as an anti-Russian movement. In such cases two synchronised narratives of holiday rejection and alternative celebration arise. This tendency is visible both in marginal pro-Ukrainian Russian nationalist actors and the anti-Ukrainian camp. Of the nationalist actors this research is concerned with, Russian Volunteer Corps, WotanJugend, Russian Imperial Movement/Imperial Legion, Rusich, Tsarskiy Krest, and Ordinary Tsarism effectively set a counter-celebration date one day before the original holiday. Since in their historical narrative February 23 is framed as the “day of shame” (RIM 2024a) or as the “*Day of Russia's betrayal*” (Tsarskiy Krest 2022), such groups celebrate Defender of the Fatherland Day on 22 February, commemorating the beginning of the Ice March. The Ice March was a several-month-long military campaign of the Volunteer Army in the Kuban region, which became mythologised among White Russian émigrés (Kenez 1971, 96-8). Actors who share this historical narrative, even fighting on different sides today, portray themselves as heirs to the White movement. For example, in 2024 RDK wrote: “*Like the heroes of the Ice March, the Russian Volunteer Corps today defends the Russian people from their own madness*” (RDK 2024a). Such narrative is translated into images as well. As an example, RDK's article (2023a) about Defender of the Fatherland Day has a thumbnail which shows an RDK fighter and White Army general Mikhail Drozdovsky on one side, and a Russian Armed Forces soldier and Red Army general Semyon Budyonny on the other – clearly demonstrating the dichotomy of “us” versus “them” (See Figure A1). The narrative of White Army invocation can also be seen in other visual media. These alternate celebrations are always accompanied by images of White Army volunteers and a symbol of a crown of thorns pierced with a sword, which derives from the military Order of the Ice March (See Figure A2).

The texts which contest the official commemorative narrative also imply that either the contemporary Russian government is a direct heir of the Bolsheviks, portraying them as “*followers of the victorious red scum*” (WotanJugend 2022); or that the remnants of Soviet heritage are still influential in different institutions – as is illustrated in the Imperial Legion’s 2025 publication, criticising “*red commanders*” who send soldiers on cannon fodder assaults (Imperial Legion 2025a). Furthermore, while in Defender of the Fatherland Day celebration texts the state speaks about Russia’s multinational character, the abovementioned groups stress “*Russkii*” ethnic identity. Often, this ethnic Russian identity is represented as a victim of the Soviet Union: “*This is how Russophobes turned Russians into Soviets, and then into ‘Rossiyan’ aborigines*” (RIM 2024a). Additionally, some of these groups demonstrate anti-Semitism while stressing Lev Trotsky’s Jewish origins and framing the Bolsheviks as a “*gang of Jews*” (Tsarskiy Krest 2024a). Contrary to these actors, if a group shares National Bolshevik ideology as its cornerstone, the original meaning of Defender of the Fatherland Day as Red Army Day is not only accepted but celebrated as well. Such an actor from the focus group of this study is The Other Russia of E. V. Limonov, which is more commonly known by its previous shortened name – *Natsboly*. In their narrative the Red Army and its generals are glorified and portrayed as more skilled than the military officials of the White Army (Pryamoie Deystvie 2026a).

Not all those who reject the Soviet past celebrate Defender of the Fatherland Day on February 23. The Orthodox fundamentalist movement Sorok Sorokov refuses to celebrate the beginning of the Ice March, framing both February 22 and 23 as dates “connected to the Civil War rather than to the defence of the Fatherland”, yet still celebrates February 23, justifying this by acceptance of the status quo, since “*the true*” Defender of the Fatherland Day has not yet been “*earned*” (Sorok Sorokov 2024a). However, most of the nationalist actors who celebrate February 23 not only accept the holiday, they also suggest that it “*is acquiring ever more meaning, importance, and significance*” (WarGonzo 2024a), given the current context of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Brigade Espanola even claimed that February 23 had become Russia’s “most important holiday” (Espanola 2024). Dugin took this idea even further and called it “the Day of Russia” – a holiday that already exists on a different date and is mostly criticised by nationalist actors (Dugin 2024a). Such celebrations also evoke a continuous historical narrative that serves as mythmaking about the expulsion of alien forces. The analysed data indicate that among the actors who celebrate February 23, the meaning-making of the holiday differs. Some nationalists, who apparently lack their own

mnemonic approach to collective identity, suggest that although the holiday is redefined because of the war, the day belongs exclusively to soldiers fighting against Ukraine (RSotM 2024). In other instances, it can be redefined as a whole-Russian celebration, even as “*the most important holiday*” (Espanola 2024).

Dugin, Tsargrad Society, and Malofeev not only redefine the celebration of February 23, they use civilisational and messianic lenses to interpret this holiday: “*It is the holiday [...] Reminding us that ‘there is nowhere to retreat - behind us stands the Third Rome’. That our country is the ‘last trench’ of the true faith, Orthodoxy, and that if we yield, all of humanity will collapse into the abyss*” (Malofeev 2024a). This approach towards Defender of the Fatherland Day, portraying Russia as a civilisational katechon, directly fits into what Wertsch framed as the Russian national narrative project (Wertsch 2021, 191). Tsargrad Society and Malofeev create a messianic narrative in which the Defender of the Fatherland Day, the so-called Russian Spring, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine are interconnected by what they present as divine power. As tsarists and Orthodox Russian nationalists who largely reject the Soviet past, they recontextualise the origins of the holiday, claiming that the ‘Sevastopol Spring’ began on 23 February, creating a new reason to celebrate Defender of the Fatherland Day on the same date – “*And then the shameful events of the fratricidal Civil War, in which the Red Army was born in 1918, finally disappeared into the depths of time behind the Sevastopol Spring*” (Malofeev 2025a). Within the same messianic narrative, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is dubbed “*the Holy Military Operation*” (Tsargrad Society 2024).

Finally, while supporters of the holiday and the official narrative try to enhance the importance of the so-called SVO (*Spetsial'naya Voyennaya Operatsiya* – Special Military Operation) with the help of Defender of the Fatherland Day and vice versa, there are actors who choose to stress not only the narrative of heroism but also that of poor handling of the war. For example, at least two actors, Imperial Legion and Igor Strelkov (Girkin), criticised sending troops on frontal assaults like cannon fodder (Strelkov 2023a; Imperial Legion 2025a). “*I’m sitting with my family, celebrating. But it’s not joyful at all: so many people have been killed today,*” – wrote Strelkov. In other cases, where actors openly campaign against the war and fight on the other side, the current invasion is evaluated as “madness” (RDK 2024a).

Victory Day

In contemporary Russia, May 9, which marks the victory of the USSR over Nazi Germany, serves as the main national holiday. However, this date gained its current triumphalist narrative characteristics only from the 2000s, during Putin's rule (Snegovaya and McGlynn 2024, 48). During the Soviet period, Victory Day had different characteristics. Significant celebrations of this date started only in 1965 (Wertsch 2021, 126-7). Under Leonid Brezhnev, the celebration of May 9 was significantly expanded in the 1970s, capitalising on popular reverence for veterans of the war (Smith 2002, 85). While Victory Day was widely celebrated, it was of lesser importance than the Day of the Great October Socialist Revolution – November 7 (Wertsch 2021, 126-7). In the USSR, the Victory Day parade was held only four times, as during this period it was a private holiday to be celebrated within close circles (Pakhomova 2024, 15). The intensification of celebrations began before Putin's presidency, in the 1990s, as a result of the need to forge a new foundation for shared Russian nationhood (Pakhomova 2024, 15). Initially, Yeltsin's government reformed Victory Day celebrations away from their Bolshevik-style format, emphasising the contribution of ordinary soldiers and holding government-backed "peace parades". However, these efforts were criticised by nationalist and communist camps, and in 1995 the government reintroduced military parades and rehabilitated Soviet symbols such as the red victory banner (Smith 2002, 84–9). During Putin's rule, the prominence of May 9 reached unparalleled heights and the 1945 victory was transformed into a "new religion" and the "cult of the great victory" (Wertsch 2021, 127). Gradually, the focus shifted from historical "facts" towards performative re-enactment; historical artefacts, such as the St. George ribbon, became valued more for their ability to signify a united community celebrating the holiday than for their insight into the past (Pakhomova 2024, 15). Simultaneously, the narrative of "never again" was replaced by "we can repeat" – implying that Russians can win again in future circumstances (Pakhomova 2024, 15).

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that May 9 functions not only as a vehicle for state propaganda but also as a deeply personal occasion for family remembrance (Pakhomova 2024, 18). This duality is perhaps most visible in the Immortal Regiment, a commemorative practice that emerged in 2012 when a group of journalists in Tomsk organized a march in which participants carried photographs of their relatives who had fought in the Second World War. By 2015, the Immortal Regiment had become one of the central components of Victory Day, alongside the annual military parade (Kurilla 2023, 1273). The holiday holds the

potential to reinforce the nation-state concept, and the performative patriotism that takes place during its celebrations establishes historical continuity between the current Russian regime and its Soviet predecessor (Pakhomova 2024, 18). The Great Patriotic War and its victorious conclusion became Russia's privileged historical narrative, since this story was built on the groundwork of the already existing Expulsion of Alien Enemies narrative template and was, moreover, a recent experience lived by the generation that participated in the conflict and passed their traumatic memories on to their children and grandchildren (Wertsch 2021, 139).

Three main divergence points can be identified between state and nationalist narratives regarding Victory Day: (1) Credit for the victory – who was the main contributor to victory: The Soviet people, Russian (*Russkii*) soldiers, pre-revolutionary Russian leadership, or divine intervention; (2) the Soviet past – how actors regard the Soviet past; (3) framing of Russian identity – whether Russian identity is multicultural or monoethnic. Beyond these primary axes of divergence, marginal actors challenge the narrative of the Great Patriotic War itself, reframing it as a tragedy, and in several cases inverting the heroes-and-villains schema of the official narrative by glorifying Nazi collaborators. Despite these divergences, one narrative dominates across both state and nationalist discourses: the framing of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a continuation of the GPW. That Victory Day is widely celebrated across ideologically divided groups illustrates how the GPW functions as Russia's privileged event narrative (Wertsch 2021, 135). Since national days work as "litmus papers" to identify national values (McCrone and McPherson 2009, 219), this analysis demonstrates that Victory Day represents one of the main shared values for both the state and nationalist actors – great-power status.

Putin's annual speeches delivered at the military parade of May 9 serve as a main vehicle of the official state narrative regarding Victory Day. Such texts contain principles of Russia's domestic and foreign policies, values and efforts of nation building. Putin frames May 9 and the Great Patriotic War as a sacred and supreme holiday: "*This is our main, truly national sacred holiday,*" – said Putin in 2024. Sacralisation of Victory Day serves the bigger narrative of the sacred patriotic duty of defending the motherland: "*The defence of our Motherland when its destiny was at stake has always been sacred*" (Putin 2022b). Furthermore, the victory over Nazi Germany is framed as an event of not only national but

global significance, with Putin claiming that the Soviet generation of the Second World War “won freedom and peace for all humanity” (Putin 2025a).

While in his speeches Putin is careful with full equalisation of the Great Patriotic War with the so-called “Special Military Operation” (SVO), the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is regarded as a continuation of the GPW’s legacy and limited parallels are drawn. The war in Ukraine is framed as a continuation of ancestors’ cause – “You are defending today what your fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers fought for” (Putin 2022b). In this framework not only Russian soldiers are portrayed as defenders of the fatherland, but also Ukrainian forces are compared to Nazis to create an image of a historical enemy. Such narratives extend beyond Putin’s speeches and are reproduced across state institutions. Defence Minister Andrey Belousov, for instance, describes Russian soldiers as “selflessly fighting against neo-Nazis” while “continuing the traditions of the generation of victors” (MoD 2025a), demonstrating how the GPW framework permeates official military discourse.

The historical continuation narrative is further anchored in a specific geography. Eastern Ukraine is presented as a sacred historical ground for which Russians were fighting and dying. – *“Donbass militia alongside the Russian Army are fighting on their land today, where princes Svyatoslav and Vladimir Monomakh’s retainers, soldiers under the command of Rumyantsev and Potemkin, Suvorov and Brusilov crushed their enemies, where Great Patriotic War heroes Nikolai Vatutin, Sidor Kovpak and Lyudmila Pavlichenko stood to the end”* (Putin 2022b). This layering of historical references extends beyond the war in Ukraine. For instance, in his 2023 speech Putin mentioned other historical figures and events to narrate the story of a thousand years of Russian statehood: *“We are standing on Red Square, a place that remembers retainers of Yury Dolgoruky and Dmitry Donskoy, the people’s militia of Minin and Pozharsky, soldiers of Peter the Great and Kutuzov, the military parades of 1941 and 1945”* (Putin 2023c). As in the texts celebrating Defender of the Fatherland Day, Putin invokes the story of an unbreakable historical chain which ties together Kievan Rus, the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation.

References to historical characters and events in Victory Day speeches do not only serve as vehicles for a narrative of historical continuity. They also exemplify what Wertsch (2002; 2021) terms Russia’s schematic narrative template – Expulsion of the Alien Enemies. Putin’s

references to the 1612 Battle of Moscow, the Battle of Borodino, and battles against Nazi Germany for different cities on the eastern front evoke the sentiment that “peaceful” Russia was attacked by “treacherous” foreign enemies, yet the Russian people endured and triumphed over the invaders (Putin 2022b). Yet considering this framework, in the full context these references also imply that the collective West is a significant “other” for Russia, from where the danger comes. The Kremlin’s narrative alleges that almost all of Europe helped Nazi Germany fight against the USSR, hinting that the same is happening now, when the West is supporting Ukraine. Such references invoke the “we can repeat” narrative: *“For the first three long and harsh years of the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet Union, along with all its constituent republics, fought the Nazis virtually single-handedly, while the virtually all of Europe worked to support the Nazi war machine”* (Putin 2024a). The narrative, that the USSR was attacked by *“the whole of Europe”*, is shared by some nationalist actors as well, using the occasion as a dividing line between “us” and the enemy: *“At the end of the Second World War, up to one and a half million Europeans (excluding Germans) ended up in Russian captivity. That is why we celebrate May 9 as Victory Day, while they celebrate May 8 as a Day of Reconciliation and Mourning. We have different holidays and different reasons for them”* (Russkaya Obshchina 2022).

Putin’s 2022 speech frames NATO as an immediate threat approaching Russian borders: *“NATO countries did not want to heed us, which means they had totally different plans. And we saw it [...] The NATO bloc launched an active military build-up on the territories adjacent to us [...] The threat grew every day”* (Putin 2022b). In the official narrative, portraying NATO as a treacherous alien force that uses Kyiv as its puppet and closes in on Russian borders serves as a justification for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, in his Victory Day speeches of 2023 and 2024, Putin no longer focused on NATO directly. Instead, he shifted his rhetoric against “western globalist elites” (Putin 2023c), accusing them of provoking “bloody conflicts”, orchestrating coups, and encouraging “Russophobia”. In this framing, the West is portrayed not only as a military threat but as a civilisational danger seeking to erase the lessons of history – *“the West would love to forget the lessons of World War II”* (Putin 2024a).

Since Victory Day carries the potential to reinforce the concept of a nation-state (Pakhomova 2024, 18), celebratory speeches include a re-imagining of the Russian nation and community. The narrative of Russia imagined as a common home of a unified multi-ethnic

community is reiterated in Putin's 2022 speech: "*Today, our warriors of different ethnicities are fighting together [...] This is where the power of Russia lies, a great invincible power of our united multi-ethnic nation*" (Putin 2022b). This narrative is developed further in efforts to reshape the meaning of the ethnic Russian – *Russkii* identity. In his 2025 speech Putin called all soldiers of the Red Army "*Russkii soldiers*": "*Our duty is to defend the honour of the Red Army soldiers and commanders, and the heroism of fighters of different ethnic backgrounds who will forever remain Russian (Russkii) soldiers in world history*" (Putin 2025a). Putin's choice not to use the broader civic category of "*Rossiiskii*" illustrates the Kremlin's efforts to detach Russianness from its ethnic foundations and base it on military sacrifice and loyalty to the state. Additionally, by extending the label "*Russkii*" to the peoples of the former Soviet republics who fought in the Red Army, Putin's rhetoric implicitly claims their sacrifice as part of a Russian national heritage, exposing the Kremlin's imperial logic by subsuming the distinct national identities of non-Russian Soviet peoples into a single Russia-centred narrative.

Unlike Defender of the Fatherland Day, Victory Day is celebrated to varying degrees by the overwhelming majority of nationalist actors. Of the 20 groups and individuals this study is concerned with, only two pro-Ukrainian actors – RDK and WotanJugend – fully reject the celebration of May 9. Z-bloggers such as Dva Mayora, WarGonzo and the Reverse Side of the Medal closely follow the Kremlin's rhetoric about the Victory. The importance of the holiday as a Russian identity marker is underlined by Dmitry Rogozin – a prominent nationalist in the early 2000s and now a senator from Russia-occupied Zaporizhzhia Oblast and a commander of one of the drone centres: "*Victory Day is more than a holiday. It is a means of recognizing who is one of us and who is not*" (Rogozin 2024).

Nevertheless, important divergences between nationalist and state narratives exist. Among the few groups who reevaluate the meaning of the victory and the GPW is the Russian Imperial Movement and its military wing. RIM frames World War II as "*the greatest tragedy for the Russian nation*" (RIM 2023). According to their narrative, Russians fighting on both sides were "collaborators" – "*It turned out that no matter which side you were on, you would still be a collaborator. If you were on the Soviet side, you would be defending the Soviet-Jewish occupation of Russia. If you were on the German side, then you would be defending the German occupation*" (RIM 2023). In this narrative, not only is the GPW framed as a tragedy, but the historical continuity propagated by the Kremlin is also disrupted. By

deploying anti-Semitic conspiracy rhetoric, portraying the Soviet regime as a “Jewish occupation” of Russia, RIM reframes the Soviet state not as a legitimate predecessor of modern Russia but as an alien oppressor. RIM’s military wing – Imperial Legion criticises the cult of victory – “*pobedobesie*” (victory mania), claiming that the GPW “*inflicted damage on the combat effectiveness of the Russian army*” by “*legitimising unjustified losses of personnel*” (Imperial Legion 2024). By this claim, Legion not only criticises Soviet commanders but also modern Russian conduct of the war in Ukraine. Yet the Imperial Legion does not fully reject Victory Day itself, as is evident from the 2025 celebratory video of its commander Denis Gariev (Imperial Legion 2025b).

Anti-Bolshevik sentiments regarding Victory Day are shared by other tsarist and ultra-Orthodox movements. Tsarskiy Krest frames World War II as “*one of the greatest punishments of the Russian (Russkii) nation*”, caused by the 1917 revolution and the execution of the Romanov family (Tsarskiy Krest 2023). However, the movement still celebrates the victory, evoking a sacralisation narrative, connecting the victory to the Orthodox faith and attributing it to ethnic Russian soldiers: “*The prayers were heard, and the Lord granted victory to the Russian soldier on Easter, as a symbol of the future covenant of Russia’s Resurrection and return to its true destiny, which is still yet to come*” (Tsarskiy Krest 2023). Thus, the victory is not only celebrated but mystified and envisaged as a tabula rasa for the Russian nation. While Aleksandr Dugin is not known for his criticism of the Bolshevik past, on May 9, 2023, he forwarded a text by Konstantin Malofeev on his channel, which carried a similar victory sacralisation narrative: “*For us Russians, the Great Victory achieved during Bright Week in 1945 became a true ‘Second Easter’. It became the day of our people’s resurrection after the long godless five-year plans, after attempts to make us forget our faith and our kinship. But in those years, the Red Army became God’s army, fighting against the satanic evil of Nazism*” (Malofeev 2023a). As in his Defender of the Fatherland Day texts, Malofeev here evokes the concept of the “Third Rome” – a symbol of Russian messianic consciousness (Duncan 2000, 55) – “*And once again, retreat is impossible – behind us is the Third Rome*”.

While Putin’s narrative credits the Soviet people for the victory in the GPW, both Tsarskiy Krest and Imperial Legion not only emphasise ethnic Russian soldiers but also claim that the triumph over Nazi Germany was made possible by the pre-revolutionary infrastructure and demographic policies of Tsar Nicholas II (Tsarskiy Krest 2023; Imperial Legion 2025c), and

even by his divine intervention (Tsarskiy Krest 2024b). Narratives about who deserves credit for the victory differ among other types of nationalist actors as well. For example, the anti-migration movement Russkaya Obshchina praises former tsarist generals who joined the Red Army after the civil war, claiming that if fewer such commanders had been repressed by the Bolsheviks, the GPW could have developed in a different direction (Russkaya Obshchina 2023). The neo-Nazi Rusich group and the tsarist movement Ordinary Tsarism emphasise an ethnic Russian victory. However, by the term “*Russkii*” Rusich refers not only to Russians but to Belarusians and Ukrainians as well: “*the contribution of the RUSSIANS (Eastern Slavs): 91% of Heroes of the Soviet Union, 84.2% as their share in the Army, 88.7% of those awarded medals; while their share in the population of the USSR was 78%*” (Rusich 2025a). A similar narrative and statistics are shared by Ordinary Tsarism, adding that “*The Great Patriotic War was won specifically by Russians, not by 666 mysterious peoples of every faith and every colour of the rainbow*” (Ordinary Tsarism 2025a). The same narrative is reframed by Eurasianist Aleksandr Dugin: “*It was first and foremost a victory of the Russian people. And of the brotherly peoples of our single great power*” (Dugin 2024b). Although Dugin is commonly identified as a statist nationalist (Laruelle 2019, 10), this formulation contains both ethnonationalist and imperialist narratives, framing the “*Russkii*” nation as “first among equals” (Kuzio 2022, 114).

Through Telegram posts made on May 9, the main shared narrative among nationalist groups is the framing of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a continuation of the Great Patriotic War. Such discourse is frequently reinforced by images (See Figure A3), showing Russian soldiers from different time periods, creating not only a sense of connection between the so-called SVO and the GPW but also evoking a broader historical continuity spanning centuries. In such images, Russian soldiers often stand over or display captured Nazi and Ukrainian flags, repeating the Kremlin’s propaganda which portrays Ukrainian Armed Forces as Nazi successors. This narrative is shared by actors with different political ideologies, such as Eurasianist Dugin, the anti-immigrant movement *Russkii Mech*, the tsarist movement Tsarskiy Krest, Z-blogger WarGonzo, and nearly all other actors examined in this study. In such cases, the Kremlin’s narrative regarding the connections between the so-called SVO and the GPW is reinforced. Dugin directly states: “*1941-1945 and 2022-? are the same war*” (Dugin 2024c). This framing demonstrates how present events are observed through the lens of the GPW as a privileged event narrative (Wertsch 2021, 135). In another text, Dugin attempts to explain the reasoning behind the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its connection

to World War II. As he explains, in the 1990s “*Western-oriented liberals led by Yeltsin*” took away “*the fruits of Victory*”, Russia lost Eastern Europe, “*NATO kept pushing toward the former territories of the Empire*”, and now Putin’s goal is to “*return*” the Victory to the Russians (Dugin 2024d). Dugin’s words serve not only as an illustration of how the GPW is used as a lens for contemporary events, but also illustrate how the schematic narrative template (Wertsch 2021) works to evaluate the past. In Dugin’s framing, the war in Ukraine serves as a Russian pushback against an external threat, evoking the Expulsion of Alien Enemies narrative template.

Among the actors who openly and fully reject Victory Day are the RDK, fighting on the Ukrainian side, and WotanJugend – a neo-Nazi movement (Bellingcat 2019) led by musician Aleksei Levkin, who lives in Ukraine and was a member of the RDK. In their rejection of the holiday, the Russian Volunteer Corps focuses on the death toll: “*The neo-Soviets treat as a celebration a day of mourning that commemorates the deaths of millions of Slavs, Germans, and other Europeans*” (RDK 2023b). WotanJugend’s rhetoric is more radical and openly favours Nazi Germany, portraying May 9 as “*the day of Europe’s funeral*” (WotanJugend 2023a) and “*the tragic date*” which became “*a deadly noose cast around the neck of all European nations*” (WotanJugend 2023b). An image (see Figure A4) shared on the WotanJugend Telegram channel displays the insignia of Nazi collaborationist Slavic units – the 1st SS Cossack Cavalry Division, the Russian Liberation Army (ROA), the SS Galicia Division, the Belarusian Home Defence, and the Russian Liberation People’s Army (RONA) – accompanied by the ironic caption “*Grandfathers fought*”, inverting the roles of heroes and villains in the classic GPW narrative. In this context, the GPW as a privileged event narrative is entirely rejected and the Expulsion of Alien Enemies narrative template (Wertsch 2021) is inverted; yet the actor nonetheless operates within this framework, framing the Soviet regime as an occupier and the ROA and other collaborators as freedom fighters.

Analysis demonstrates that Victory Day functions as a unifying commemorative practice across the Russian nationalist spectrum, despite disagreements about the war’s meaning and legacy. Its nation-building potential is evident, since it functions as the most important historical event in the Russian collective memory and even among ideologically opposed groups. Statist nationalists largely align with the Kremlin’s narrative, though in some cases they reinforce and radicalise the official messaging. However, diverse groups interpret the

Victory differently. While National Bolsheviks such as The Other Russia fully accept the Soviet past and credit it with the victory, for tsarist and Orthodox fundamentalists, the victory was made possible by Russian faith and divine intervention. Victory Day is even celebrated by the neo-Nazi Rusich Group, whose commander, Aleksei Milchakov, has personally styled himself as a Nazi (RFE/RL 2022). The celebration of May 9 reveals many contradictions within the nationalist camp. In order to fit Victory Day into their own narrative, some tsarist groups adopt a selective approach to history, sometimes even inventing “facts” and claiming that the victory was made possible by pre-revolutionary reforms or the spiritual intervention of Tsar Nicholas II. In other cases, groups that emphasise the ethnic Russian contribution to the victory and generally reject multinational identity-building efforts in Russia – criticising such efforts as a Soviet legacy – frequently post photographs (See Figure A5) of Georgian Meliton Kantaria raising the Soviet flag over the Reichstag in their celebration posts. Unlike Defender of the Fatherland Day, only a handful of marginal groups fully reject the holiday.

Russia Day

Similar to the previously discussed holidays, divergent state and nationalist narratives about Russia Day include opposing ideas about Russian identity, historical continuity, and the legitimisation of the Soviet regime. Yet these differences are overshadowed by debates which question the core legitimacy of the holiday. Considering its clear alternate celebration date and differing narratives, Defender of the Fatherland Day was previously described as the most contested holiday. However, Russia Day is clearly the most widely rejected national day among Russian nationalists. Moreover, the analysis showed that of the four holidays examined in this research, Russia Day receives the least enthusiastic engagement from the Kremlin, state institutions, and Kremlin-aligned statist nationalists. Additionally, unlike the three other national days, Russia Day does not independently invoke the “Expulsion of Alien Enemies” (Wertsch 2021) narrative template, which may explain why it has been rejected by the wider public.

Although it bears the name of the nation itself, Russia Day, celebrated on June 12, is sometimes described as a forgotten holiday that nevertheless remains an official occasion (Geisler 2009, 11). Russia Day has consequently received little academic attention. The existing scholarship focuses not on how this holiday is celebrated in contemporary Russia, but on how it was created in the 1990s and how Russians reacted to it. When this holiday

was first established in 1992 by Yeltsin's government, it was named the Day of Adoption of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Russia and was conceived as the main holiday of the "new Russia" (Efremova 2014, 89-90). Yet from the outset it was a controversial date (Smith 2002, 92). June 12 marked two important events from the 1990s: the 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Russian SFSR and the first presidential elections in 1991 (Efremova 2014, 90). Sometimes this date was dubbed "Independence Day", since Yeltsin himself used such wording in 1993: "Russia celebrates its national holiday, Independence Day" (Yeltsin 1993). For nationalists and communists, or the red-brown coalition, June 12 marked two decisive steps toward the dissolution of the Soviet Union; yet even for those who welcomed the fall of the USSR, it was not clear what was celebrated on this date: a national or presidential anniversary. The main point of confusion was the question – from whom did Russia gain its independence? – democratic critics joked that Russia declared itself "free from its own territories, its own colonies", while the red-brown coalition ridiculed Yeltsin's government by saying that June 12 marked "the authorities' independence from the people" (Smith 2002, 92-3).

While searching for the "national idea", in response to citizens' confusion, in 1997-8 (in 1998 according to Efremova (2014), in 1997 according to Smith (2002)) Yeltsin proposed to rename the holiday as Russia Day – although the questions regarding what is celebrated were not answered, the date remained a national holiday (Efremova 2014, 92). Yeltsin encouraged people to celebrate Russia's centuries-old history, instead of "*an important event, but one far removed from the lives of ordinary people*" (Smith 2002, 94). According to Russian state media, the name of the holiday was officially changed only in 2002, when the new Labour Code of the Russian Federation came into force, establishing public holidays and days off (TASS 2022). From 1992, official celebrations include the awarding of the State Prize of the Russian Federation in the fields of science and technology, literature and the arts, and humanitarian activities (Efremova 2014, 90). Putin's speeches delivered on these occasions serve as the main texts in identifying the Kremlin's narratives regarding Russia Day.

At this ceremony Putin is much more precise and laconic while speaking about the holiday itself. The date is detached from its actual historical origins. Putin never mentions the 1990 sovereignty declaration, nor the Yeltsin era. Instead he is focused on the same narratives propagated mainly on Victory Day, namely – "Russia's thousand-year history", the "unity

of multi-ethnic people”, patriotism, previous historical victories, Russia’s endurance and the importance of the so-called SVO (Putin 2022c; 2023d; 2024b). Such positioning against the background of Russia Day absolutely opposes the general understanding of the concept of national holiday itself, which should refer to a significant event from the past of the collective (Gammelgaard and Šarić 2012, 6). In several speeches Putin seeks to link the holiday to the Russian past by mentioning Peter the Great (Putin 2022c) and the Novgorod Republic (Putin 2024b). The main cornerstone for the Kremlin’s narrative about Russia Day is “thousand-year history”, through which Russia is imagined as a continuous state with an unchangeable nature. Even from the medieval period Russia is framed as a multi-ethnic home for Slavic, Finno-Ugric, Turkic and “other tribes from the Baltic to the Black Sea” (Putin 2024b). Additionally, Putin binds together the Tsardom of Moscow, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union in his narrative of a historical continuity chain – *“The glory and sovereign power of Ancient Rus developed and strengthened during the great eras of the Tsardom of Moscow, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union. And all these stages form one inseparable whole with modern Russia. Therefore, I consider it necessary and historically appropriate to celebrate Russia Day as a symbol of the uninterrupted thousand-year path of our Fatherland”* (Putin 2024b).

Although on Russia Day state-sanctioned events take place across all of Russia, ministries, like the Ministry of Defence and Foreign Affairs, are not enthusiastic in the tone they use on social media, unlike on Victory Day. If in previous holiday cases these two institutions reiterated the Kremlin’s narratives, they seem to be less consistent with regard to Russia Day. In previous years, the Defence Ministry’s Telegram channel casually shared the celebration of the holiday by *Yunarmiya* (Young Army Cadets National Movement) and the opening of Z-shaped memorials (MoD 2022, 2024a, 2025b), while also trying to re-contextualise the original meaning and background of the holiday, yet the Kremlin’s main narrative framework was absent. The Telegram channel of the Russian MFA is more enthusiastic in covering the holiday celebration both domestically and in other countries through their diplomatic missions, yet the Kremlin’s narrative is only partially represented. Annually, the MFA posts banal celebration cards with a simple message – “I Love Russia” (MFA 2024). However, the Russian MFA follows the same pattern of disconnection from the origins of Russia Day and replacing the original context with other historical periods. For instance, in 2022, information was published on their Telegram channel about how a

movement supported by the MFA “unfurled the world’s largest Victory Banner” to celebrate Russia Day (MFA 2022).

What makes Russia Day different from the two previously discussed holidays is that this day does not easily fit in Russia’s schematic narrative template of “Expulsion of Alien Enemies” (Wertsch 2021). Nevertheless, as the analysis has shown, over the past years the state has been trying to shift the original meaning of the holiday and integrate it into the discourse of victory over alien forces – “*Patriotism and responsibility for the fate of the Fatherland were bequeathed to us by our ancestors, who achieved truly grand victories in both labour and warfare*” (Putin 2023d). The same efforts are illustrated by a Russia Day celebration card published by the MFA in 2022 (See Figure A6). The image shows headwear associated with previous historical adversaries of Russia: a medieval great helm – referencing the Teutonic Knights, a helmet of Polish hussars, a bicorne – referencing Napoleon, a 1940s German military helmet, and a square which is left empty for a future defeated enemy. “*We politely asked them not to expand eastward...*” – is written on the card, referencing NATO’s enlargement to the East, which Russia uses as a justification for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This minimalistic image serves as an excellent example of how Russia’s Expulsion of Alien Enemies narrative template (Wertsch 2002; 2021) is utilised in the official discourse as a lens for the evaluation of the past, present, and future. This image also follows the logic of “historical continuation” and “we can repeat” narratives.

Russia Day remains a controversial holiday among nationalists. The day is mostly celebrated by statist nationalists, like Z-bloggers. However, the data examined in this study has demonstrated that even among such groups it is the least celebrated holiday, since its celebration is not consistent, and some groups do not pay attention to Russia Day annually. Some nationalists stress the background of the holiday and try to give it a new meaning. For example, military blogger Semyon Pegov, author of the Telegram channel WarGonzo, wrote that since the beginning of the so-called SVO Russia Day “*has started to take on a new and more substantial meaning*” (WarGonzo 2024b). Pegov claims that in the 1990s instead of gaining independence, “*Russia became fully dependent on the Global West*”. According to his narrative, the country began “*regaining independence*” in 2008, after the invasion of Georgia, which he calls “*liberation of brotherly peoples from the NATO yoke that had embedded itself in Georgia*” (WarGonzo 2024b). Yet such framing does not provide the reader with reasons why Russia Day should be celebrated on 12 June and how the so-called

SVO is connected to this holiday. Pegov even claimed that Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine “*are now cleansing this date with blood and sweat*” (WarGonzo 2025). In an attempt to legitimise the date, he repeatedly mentioned that “*It is precisely on June 12 that the Church commemorates the great Russian saint, Alexander Nevsky*” (WarGonzo 2024b). Most of the groups celebrating Russia Day choose to ignore its origins. In 2024 the Reverse Side of the Medal, the Telegram channel of a Z-blogger with ties to the Wagner Group, reposted a quote from Putin’s aide Vladimir Medinsky: “*We should, of course, forget about that Declaration of State Sovereignty. Let only a narrow circle of professional lawyers know about it and joke about it. Russia Day should instead be a day when we celebrate the 1,200-year continuous history of the Russian state*” (Medinsky 2024).

It is worth noting one particular case of the anti-migrant far-right movement *Russkii Mech*. Like other nationalists, the movement ignores the background of June 12. However, while reframing the holiday in one of their celebration cards, the group voiced a marginal narrative, which portrays Russia as “*the heir to a rich European culture and a great civilization*” (*Russkii Mech* 2025).

However, based on the analysis, it can be said that Russia Day is mostly celebrated by statist nationalists who lack a strong ideological basis. On the other hand, the holiday is widely rejected by National Bolshevik, Eurasianist, Tsarist, and Orthodox fundamentalist actors. While *Natsboly* and Eurasianists reject June 12 for obvious reasons, namely the fall of the USSR, the date is also framed by Tsarists as a loss of Russian lands. “*The holiday of Russia’s dismemberment*” – this is how Russia Day is dubbed by RIM (2024b). The same wording is used by the *Natsboly* as well, who have a fundamentally different ideology from RIM and praise the Soviet past (*Pryamoie Deystvie* 2024). Actors with negative attitudes towards the Soviet regime regret the fact that former territories of the Russian Empire were given republic statuses in the Union, which is seen as a prerequisite for the separation of these territories from Russia (RIM 2024b; *Russkaya Obshchina* 2025a). However, the main villain of this counter-narrative is Boris Yeltsin. For example, Igor Girkin (Strelkov), who dubbed Russia Day “*Independence from Common Sense Day*” (Strelkov 2023b), calls Boris Yeltsin “*Borya-alkash*” – alcoholic Borya – and blames him for “*the fragmentation of the territory of historical Russia into ‘independent sovereign states’*” by declaring the sovereignty of the RSFSR (Strelkov 2025). Apparently, critics of this holiday are more enthusiastic in their denunciation of the date than government officials and common statist nationalists are in

celebrating it. The date is largely ignored by the pro-Ukrainian Russian nationalist camp, yet among the few posts dedicated to Russia Day, such actors ridicule the ideology of Putin's regime. In 2024 WotanJugend reposted an image (See Figure A7) from an RDK-affiliated channel, which showed a flag combining imperial and current tricolours, the Soviet flag, the St. George ribbon, Kolovrat – a symbol frequently used by Russian aryanists – and letters such as “Z” connected to the invasion of Ukraine. In this way, the group ridiculed the ideological contradictions of those who celebrate June 12 while simultaneously viewing the fall of the USSR as a tragedy.

Nationalists rejecting June 12 as an appropriate date for the celebration of Russia Day tend to put forward alternate dates for this holiday. Suggested days for commemoration as Russia Day differ based on nationalist actors' ideologies. For example, the neo-Nazi Rusich group suggested celebrating this holiday on July 3, commemorating “*the victory of Sviatoslav the Brave over the Khazar Khaganate, which took place on July 3, 964*” (Rusich 2025b). This narrative is based on a 20th century anti-Semitic myth, prevalent in Russian nationalist circles, which portrayed Jews as a former and future threat to Russia; since Khazar elites converted to Judaism, it became a topic for historical reinterpretation, not least among Russian anti-Semitic nationalists (Laruelle 2019, 59). One of the most popular alternate suggestions made by ultra-Orthodox nationalists is to celebrate Russia Day on July 28, commemorating the 988 Baptism of Rus (Malofeev 2023b; Sorok Sorokov 2022). This idea carries a pan-Slavic narrative, since through this lens the date is framed as “*unifying*” for “*Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus*” and “*it marks the birth of the Thousand-Year Russian Orthodox Civilization and the Thousand-Year Russian Empire*” (Sorok Sorokov 2022). While such framing shares the Kremlin's message about Russia's thousand-year continuous history, it disregards non-Slavic and non-Orthodox groups living in the Federation. Other alternate date proposals include September 21 – commemorating the victory of Dmitry Donskoy over the Mongols in the 1380 Kulikovo Battle (Russkaya Obshchina 2025a), and November 2 – in remembrance of the foundation of the Russian Empire by Peter the Great (Ordinary Tsarism 2024). It is always unclear how nationalist actors set the precise dates for historical events that took place centuries ago.

An alternate framing of Russia Day as Aleksandr Nevsky Day was already evident (WarGonzo 2024b) among groups celebrating June 12. Additionally, some actors reject Russia Day yet celebrate June 12 as Aleksandr Nevsky's Day. However, the narratives of

such individuals are inconsistent. For example, in 2024, Malofeev, similarly to Pegov, claimed that June 12 commemorated the birthday of Aleksandr Nevsky and called it “*the real Russia Day*” (Malofeev 2024b), detaching the original holiday date from its post-Soviet background. However, he had previously proposed (2023b) to celebrate Russia Day on the Day of the Baptism of Rus. In 2025, his narrative once again shifted – while reiterating that the “*real Russia Day*” must commemorate the Baptism of Rus, he said he would celebrate “*the birthday of the holy and righteous Prince Aleksandr Nevsky*” (Malofeev 2025b). Such inconsistency extends further. Dugin, who frequently reposts Malofeev’s publications, including texts about Russia Day, proposed an alternate framework – “*The real Russia Day still lies ahead – it will be the day of our Victory, the day Kyiv is taken. For now, we do not yet have a true Russia Day*” (Dugin 2023).

National Unity Day

National Unity Day or the Day of People’s Unity celebrated on November 4 is the second most studied Russian national holiday, although it garnered less scholarly attention compared to Victory Day. Of the four national days this study is concerned with, Unity Day is unique since it is the only holiday which was fully established during Putin’s presidency in 2004. It honours Moscow’s liberation from Polish invaders in 1612, which was followed by the end of the “Time of Troubles” and subsequent Russian expansion under the Romanov dynasty (Stewart 2021, 1883). Essentially, National Unity Day replaced November 7 on which the Great October Revolution was commemorated. After the fall of the USSR, when the Russian Federation was left with the Soviet holidays, Yeltsin’s government tried to re-contextualise several holidays, including the Day of the October Revolution, which was rebranded as the Day of Accord and Reconciliation – celebrated on the same day. Yet such framing was rejected by both liberal and conservative camps, since the date of the Revolution could not serve as a symbol of unity (Omelicheva 2017, 431). Therefore, in 2004, the celebration of November 7 was abolished and replaced by National Unity Day, which, according to official interpretations, marks “remarkable and heroic events of 1612” when “peoples of different faiths, ethnicities, and classes united for one purpose – to save their motherland and to defend the Russian nationhood” (Omelicheva 2017, 432). The new holiday encouraged Russians to draw parallels between the Time of Troubles and the 1990s – two periods in Russian history known for disorder – while framing Putin as a stabilising force, similarly to the Romanov dynasty; the invention of Unity Day aimed to foster a form of state nationalism which would be acceptable for the Kremlin (Stewart 2021, 1884).

Similar to Victory Day, November 4 offered another triumphant foundation myth for “forging Russia’s unity and fostering popular legitimacy of President Putin” (Omeličeva 2017, 438). Russian collective memory carried two interpretations of the Time of Troubles: traumatic – as a symbol of a period of social upheavals; and patriotic – as a memory of a Russian victory over foreign forces (Tkachenko 2021, 95). Considering this context and the Kremlin’s framing of National Unity Day, it is evident that the newly established holiday and the historical period it was connected with were understood through the lens of the Expulsion of Alien Enemies narrative template (Wertsch 2021).

However, the unity narrative and triumphant myth of 1612 have been largely constructed by the Kremlin. This year did not mark the end of the Time of Troubles. Eventually, Russia was forced to concede territories to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Sweden. Additionally, while the Kremlin’s narrative is focused on the people’s militia led by Kuzma Minin and Dmitry Pozharsky, the liberation of Moscow was already being carried out by Prince Dmitry Trubetskoi and his Cossack host. The fact that the Cossacks and Pozharsky’s militia almost went to war against each other undermines the unity narrative (Omeličeva 2017, 432). Yet choosing November 4 for Unity Day was not a coincidence. This date was not only in the same timeframe as the previously celebrated Revolution Day, but also marks the holiday of one of the most sacred icons in the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) – the Day of Our Lady of Kazan, which was celebrated during the pre-revolutionary period. This day was celebrated by the ROC from 1649, since the icon was worshipped as a divine force behind the victory over the Polish invaders (Moskwa 2015, 230-1). The Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia embraced the idea of the establishment of National Unity Day on the same date; the ROC viewed the holiday “as a blend of civic and religious traditions” (Omeličeva 2017, 437). However, instead of civic engagement, from the first year of its celebration, Russian nationalist groups co-opted Unity Day, staging demonstrations and marches (Omeličeva 2017, 442). If in 2005 the first Right-wing March was led by state-aligned nationalists such as Aleksandr Dugin, in 2006 the process was overtaken by ethnonationalists, who established the tradition of the annual Russian March taking place on November 4 (Laruelle 2019, 113; Varga 2023, 45). This movement, with the motto “Russia for Russians” combined with threats against migrants and ethnic minorities, went against Putin’s multinational unity narrative (Omeličeva 2017, 442; Stewart 2021, 1884).

In the official rhetoric, the 1612 liberation of Moscow is projected as the foundational story of Russian civic unity, which is a prerequisite for the state's wholeness and protection from foreign threats. As Putin puts it, in 1612 Russian people “*themselves rose up to fight for their country, cleansed it of strife, betrayal, and humiliation, united together, put an end to the Time of Troubles, and restored legitimate authority and our unified statehood*” (Putin 2022d). The main focus of the celebration is not only civic unity, but unity of people and the state. In the official narrative, the liberation of Moscow was achieved by the unity of “*people of different nationalities and faiths*” (Putin 2022d). This line is closely followed by state institutions such as the MoD and MFA, which celebrate the day by posting images demonstrating the different ethnicities of Russia (See Figure A8). Similar to previous holiday celebration narratives, in this framing Russia is imagined as a state which is home to diverse people of different ethnicities and faiths, as a “*common home*” and “*one multinational family*” (MoD 2024b). However, the analysis demonstrated that in the case of Unity Day, this is the main message of the commemoration, and the multi-ethnic composition of Russia is framed as natural and eternal. In the official storytelling surrounding the holiday, Russia's multi-ethnic character is allegedly traced to the times of the medieval Rus and the Novgorod Republic: “[Alexander Nevsky] *was thinking about preserving the Russian people, and then all the peoples living on the territory of our vast country*” (Putin 2023e). However, even in the official narrative, the *Russkii* nation is imagined as the “first among equals” (Kuzio 2022, 114), which is the connective tissue for the different ethnicities within one country: “*Throughout its history, Russia has lived and triumphed through the brotherhood of the peoples inhabiting it, in which the Russian people served as the foundation that bound together and developed interethnic relations*” (MoD 2023). This narrative traces its roots to Soviet times when Russians were portrayed as the “elder brother” and “first among equals” (Kuzio 2022, 114). Such framing, which is characteristic of Eurasianist ideology, claims that the Soviet Union and the Tsarist Empire were beneficial to the non-Russian peoples, since Russian rule was allegedly founded on mutual respect and brotherhood, instead of Western colonialism (Kuzio 2022, 40).

Putin in his different speeches clearly names the West as a centuries-old civilizational threat to Russia. Evidently, considering the context, the holiday itself is framed as a liberation from Western aggressors, yet the Russian President also selectively references other historical eras. While meeting “historians and representatives of traditional religions of Russia” on the occasion of Unity Day, Putin spoke about the period of the Civil War, and as he claimed,

“foreign powers were lining their pockets” on Russian *“people’s tragedy”*, tearing apart *“historical Russia”* (Putin 2022d). By “foreign powers” Putin referred to the Allied intervention in the Civil War. The Kremlin’s narrative is used to victimise Russia in current times, comparing the Allied intervention in the 1910s to Western support for Ukraine during the full-scale invasion – *“Indeed, now it is also not easy; it is bitter because in fact the people are fighting each other. In fact, the confrontation is within the same people, just like after the 1917 upheavals when the people were set against each other”*. Putin not only blames the West for the current war with Ukraine, but also rejects Ukrainian national identity, claiming that Ukrainians and Russians are the same people.

The West is imagined not only as a physical, but also as a historical threat to Russian *“roots and moral values”* (Putin 2025b). In Putin’s framing, celebration of Unity Day is a way to maintain Russian historical memory, which faces challenges from the West – *“Our position on the preservation of historical memory and thus our sovereignty irritates some countries in the West. As a matter of fact, this has been the case for centuries”* (Putin 2022c). In the Kremlin’s narrative, Western hostility towards Russian culture and traditions traces back to the 13th century. The Mongols are portrayed as occupiers, yet a lesser threat than European powers, which explains Alexander Nevsky’s cooperation with the Golden Horde: *“the Horde, arrogant and cruel as it was, never threatened our greatest treasure – our language, traditions, and culture, something the Western conquerors were eager to suppress”* (Putin 2023e). It is worth noting that such a message echoes Eurasianist ideas that the Mongol occupation of the medieval Rus was a positive event (Varga 2023, 41).

National Unity Day is accepted by almost all nationalists without any questions, even by radical tsarist and ultra-Orthodox actors, who tend to be critical of Putin’s regime. This can be explained by the religious background of the holiday. November 4 is only rejected by pro-Ukrainian actors, such as RDK, and National Bolsheviks, such as the Other Russia. The *Natsbol* Party, the Other Russia, rejects November 4, since it prefers to celebrate November 7 – October Revolution Day – calling it *“the true Day of National Unity”* (Pryamoie Deystvie 2022). By contrast, RDK described the holiday as *“another byproduct of the newly emerged ideology of the ‘Russian World’”*, openly rejecting the Kremlin’s narrative of multi-ethnic unity: *“We see how, on the basis of an ancient triumph of Russian arms – wielded precisely by Russians (imenno Russkie) – attempts are now being made to cement the ‘monolith’ of multinationalism”* (RDK 2023c). The group rejects the idea that the holiday was *“stolen from*

nationalists”, claiming that the sole function of November 4 was to replace celebrations of November 7, and from the beginning it had the connotation of unity not of ethnic Russians but of “*Rossiyan*” (RDK 2024b). RDK’s language is openly xenophobic, telling Russian nationalists not to be surprised by “*Tajiko-Uzbek faces on posters*” (RDK 2024b), and they directly question the need for territorial integrity that includes several regions of Russia, saying that they “*do not need compatriots from Chechnya, Dagestan, Karachay-Cherkessia, or Ingushetia*” (RDK 2023c). The official narrative about Russia’s multi-ethnic character, as tied to Unity Day, is rejected by many other nationalist actors, yet they still celebrate the holiday.

Analysis demonstrated that Z-patriotic actors, who widely accept the holiday, tend to turn a blind eye to the official rhetoric about the multi-ethnic character of Russia. Some of them, like WarGonzo, even reinforce the narrative by featuring soldiers of different ethnicities in the Russian army (WarGonzo 2022). Nevertheless, some Z-bloggers quietly criticise the multi-ethnic narrative – “*It is time to remember that we are Russians, not some artificially constructed ‘Rossiyan*” (RSotM 2025). Other actors, such as Dva Mayora, propagate the need for red-white ideological reconciliation by posting images of the Soviet, imperial, and RF flags with a statement that “*there is no genuine reason for conflict*” (Dva Mayora 2025). Yet generally, Z-bloggers are more concerned with the historical background of the holiday, drawing parallels between the Time of Troubles and the war in Ukraine – “*Just as during the Time of Troubles the militia had to drive the Poles out of the Kremlin itself, so too in 2014 did yesterday’s miners fight against the regular army of Ukraine*” (WarGonzo 2024c).

Interestingly enough, Dugin, who is an Eurasianist, uses the term *Russkii* most extensively in texts dedicated to Unity Day, absolutely ignoring the narrative regarding ethnic minorities, exclusively focusing on unity between the state and people and the eschatological role of the *Russkii* nation. His narrative reinforces the state rhetoric about the West being a threat to Russia in radical terms, claiming that Russia is “*at war with the West*” and that the battlefield in Ukraine is “*the field of Armageddon*” and “*the fate of the world and of humanity*” is in the hands of the Russian nation (Dugin 2022a). In this framing, Russia is portrayed as the “*Katechon*” – a divine deterrent of “*the Collective West and its satanic anti-Christian civilisation*” (Dugin 2022b). A similar idea is shared by the Tsargrad Society and its founder, Konstantin Malofeev, for whom November 4 is “*the main Russkii holiday*” (Malofeev 2024c). If such actors accept the idea of multinational unity, they do this only on the premise

that the unity is achieved under ethnic Russian dominance. This idea is more bluntly put by the movement Sorok Sorokov, portraying the *Russkii* people as a “*state-forming nation*” which united “*200 indigenous peoples of Russia [...] around the Russian Orthodox core*” in order to form a “*multiethnic and multiconfessional state perceived as the Russian World*” (Sorok Sorokov 2024b). The framing of the named actors illustrates how the role of ethnic Russians is envisaged by a segment of nationalist actors, and how the National Narrative Project (Wertsch 2021, 184) works in Russian nationalist discourse. The idea of the *Russkii* nation being a dominant ethnic group in the country is translated into ironic celebration cards as well, which carry an Orientalist and sexist connotation, showing a Russian man surrounded by female ethnic minority representatives of the Russian Federation (See Figure A9). Such images are always accompanied by the inscription “*Many peoples – one Motherland!*”.

There are two main divergences between the state and nationalist narratives regarding Unity Day. First is the issue of to whom the victory of 1612 belongs. According to the official narrative, the victory was made possible by the unity of different peoples of Russia. Ethnonationalists reject this idea, framing the victory over the Poles as an exclusively ethnic Russian victory. For example, Ordinary Tsarism frames the official narrative of 1612 multi-ethnic unity as a “*fairy-tale mantra*” (Ordinary Tsarism 2025b). Similar actors always stress the ethnic Russian victory and that the holiday belongs to the Orthodox *Russkii* people: “*Espanola congratulates everyone on the Day of the Unity of the Russian Orthodox People in the face of the external enemy*” (Espanola 2025); “*413 years ago, Russian society united with the Russian host, and through joint efforts drove the alien occupiers from our land*” (Rusich 2025c).

The second divergence is a direct continuation of the previous issue – what kind of unity should be celebrated. Putin’s Unity Day framing of “Us” as a civic-multinational identity is challenged by ethnonationalists, who regard ethnic minorities as a threat. They frequently criticise the government for its multinational narrative: “*‘A common home’ is not simply a home that belongs to no one. It is a home that will belong to whoever is brazen and strong enough to seize it first. And the Russian state is doing everything it can to make sure that Russians (Russkie) are not the ones who seize it first*” (RIM 2024c). Additionally, ethnonationalists always express their frustration over visual content regarding Unity Day, blaming the state for the alienation of ethnic Russians from the holiday: “*There was no room*

for Russians on the poster for their own holiday” (Russkaya Obshchina 2025b); “From virtually all official booklets and banners dedicated to the ‘Day of National Unity’, the image of the Russian man is being systematically erased” (Mnogonatsional 2023).

During the period of Unity Day, Telegram channels concerned with anti-immigrant sentiment, such as *Russkii Mech*, *Mnogonatsional*, and *Russkaya Obshchina*, are flooded with xenophobic content targeting not only immigrants but ethnic minorities as well. They often criticise the government and schools for Unity Day celebration events that invoke the multinational narrative. For example, when describing a celebration in one of Moscow’s schools, *Russkii Mech* wrote: *“Russian faces are already in minority [...] the colonization of Russian lands under the watchful eye of the Gosdeds is proceeding successfully”* (*Russkii Mech* 2024). “*Gosded*”, a short version of “*Gosudarstvennii Dedy*” (state grandpas), is Russian slang mocking the aging elite and officials, which is sometimes used in relation to Vladimir Putin as well (RFE/RL 2021). However, even if some Telegram channels are critical of the government, based on the analysed data, they generally refrain from direct criticism of Putin. Instead, their targets are the “elites”, oligarchs, and officials, who are compared to the elites of 17th-century Russia and framed as traitors. For example, even state-aligned Dugin criticises Putin for not being more radical with his handling of the war in Ukraine, while framing the “elites” as traitors – *“The elite is once again betraying [the nation], while the Ruler is at times steadfast and at times wavering”* (Dugin 2022a). Therefore, in the different nationalist narratives propagated through the National Unity Day celebration, not only is the West imagined as an enemy, but non-Russian ethnic groups and parts of the Russian elites as well.

Conclusion

This research examined what narratives were constructed by the Russian state and nationalist actors around four national holidays – Defender of the Fatherland Day, Victory Day, Russia Day, and National Unity Day – from February 2022 to February 2026. Drawing on Riessman’s (2008) thematic narrative analysis and Wertsch’s (2002) concept of schematic narrative templates, the study analysed Telegram posts of twenty nationalists and three state actors, including Putin’s official speeches. The process was guided by three research questions: what narratives emerge during the aforementioned holiday celebrations and how

they diverge; what does the analysis reveal about the function of each holiday; and how Wertsch's "Expulsion of Alien Enemies" template (2021) is deployed across these narratives.

Across the four holidays, the state's narrative is built upon values and ideas of patriotism, historical continuation, multi-ethnic unity under the Russian people, great-poweriness, and anti-Westernism. All celebration content follows a framing in which Russia is imagined as a thousand-year-old multi-ethnic state, which is threatened by the West – Russia's civilisational enemy and a significant "other". The Soviet past is selectively incorporated into the Kremlin's storyline. Nationalist narratives vary. Two main divergence points arise regarding Russia's multi-ethnic nature and historical continuity. Ethnonationalists, especially those with ultra-Orthodox, tsarist, and Aryanist backgrounds, emphasise ethnic "Russkii" identity. The same actors often reject the Soviet past, portraying the Bolsheviks as occupiers. Yet such groups are divided into pro- and anti-Ukrainian camps. The state narrative is accepted on radical terms by nationalists who employ civilisational grammar, most notably Eurasianists. Although there are surface-level differences in holiday celebration practices, the analysis demonstrated that these actors generally reinforce the main values proposed by the Kremlin, yet emphasise more clearly the role of Orthodox Christianity, the ethnic *Russkii* role as a "big brother" among the different ethnicities of the country, and Russia's role as a *Katechon*. National Bolsheviks, who fully integrate the Soviet past into their narrative, are the only exception. Z-patriots, who are not particularly concerned with memory politics, tend to follow the Kremlin's narrative.

In the official framework, each of the four discussed holidays shares the same narrative template, yet each of them carries specific values: Defender of the Fatherland Day underlines the importance of patriotism, Victory Day portrays Russia's great-power status, Russia Day stresses the "thousand-year history" of Russia, and National Unity Day carries the idea that Russia is strong when its peoples are united. However, this study demonstrated that national holidays are not interchangeable commemorative occasions but distinct memory sites where national narratives are contested.

Defender of the Fatherland Day is the most ideologically polarised holiday, which demonstrates the divide between nationalist camps that reject the Soviet past and those who partially or fully integrate it into Russia's historical chain. February 23 is the date when memories of the Russian Civil War are most prominently invoked, illustrating the unresolved

legacy of Red and White nationalist camps. The Ice March counter-celebration illustrates how an unofficial commemorative practice can mobilise groups and create an alternate historical calendar. However, this study demonstrated that Defender of the Fatherland Day is gaining more prominence among both the Kremlin and several nationalists, considering the war against Ukraine and the date of the holiday, which falls one day before the anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Victory Day, as the most widely accepted celebration, serves as the main nation-building holiday. Almost all actors, including those rejecting other state holidays, accept May 9 as the most important national occasion. This illustrates how GPW functions as a privileged narrative, which carries a great emotional charge (Wertsch 2021). The biggest divide regarding this holiday is the question of to whom the victory belongs – and not the legitimacy of the date itself.

Russia Day is the most rejected national day, despite its name. Even state actors are less enthusiastic about celebrating this date. Actors who celebrate June 12 choose to forget the origins of the celebration, trying to find a new meaning for the day. Widespread nationalist rejection of Russia Day demonstrates how Boris Yeltsin is despised by such actors and invokes memories of the instability of the 1990s. Additionally, the competing alternative dates each actor proposes for this occasion reveal disagreement in Russian nationalist thought – what Russia essentially is. Should it be defined by Orthodoxy, military victories, imperial character, or civilisational role?

National Unity Day is the most complex holiday, since the 1612 liberation narrative is generally accepted as a positive event, yet the meaning is contested. While the state narrative frames it as a story of multi-ethnic civic unity, most nationalists read it as a story of exclusively *Russkii* agency against alien enemies. November 4 demonstrates the divide between civic and ethnic Russian identities – a debate that is the main point of divergence around this date. In this context, for ethnonationalists, Unity Day serves as the main platform for xenophobic rhetoric not only against migrants, but against ethnic minorities as well. It is also the holiday which illustrates the Kremlin's framework of "official nationalism" (Fediunin 2022, 440) – unity of the people and the state based on ethnic Russian leadership.

This research demonstrated that the Expulsion of Alien Enemies narrative template (Wertsch 2021) is present across the entire commemorative spectrum, yet it can function differently

based on who deploys it and against whom. The state applies the template in its classic form, framing Russia as a peaceful power which is attacked without provocation, yet upon facing an existential threat, people unite and Russia triumphs. However, as the study observed, in the Kremlin's framing the "Alien Enemy" is exclusively the Western powers, even portraying Europe as a greater threat to medieval Rus than the Mongolian Golden Horde. Some nationalists, while using the same template, focus on the idea of internal traitors as agents of the "alien enemy", which is not necessarily a state but can also be an ideology like Bolshevism. In some cases, such framing can turn into anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, portraying the Soviet regime as a Jewish agent and framing Jews as "alien enemies". In pro-Ukrainian nationalist groups, Putin's regime is framed as an alien force, dangerous to ethnic Russians. Such reinterpretations depend on what the Privileged Event Narratives (Wertsch 2021) are for specific groups. This study demonstrated that different nationalist actors may have different privileged event narratives. Although GPW is the main PEN in Russian collective memory, for some nationalists the privileged event is the Russian Civil War and resistance against the Bolsheviks. Such implications can lead to an absolute reversal of the privileged narrative, as demonstrated by the case of WotanJugend, which recasts the Soviet regime as the occupier and frames Nazi collaborator ROA as the liberation force. Additionally, the case of neo-Eurasianists clearly illustrated how the schematic narrative template and the national narrative project work together – by framing Ukraine as a Western threat to Russia, imagined as the Third Rome and the last bastion of Orthodoxy, and the war itself as a "field of Armageddon" (Dugin 2022a) where the future of mankind will be decided.

In the course of this research, several broader observations emerged. First, compared to 2022, from 2023, mnemonic activity around holidays, including their celebration and rejection, intensified. This could mean that either Telegram became a more popular platform, or that nationalists became more interested in memory politics after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Second, apparently, the wartime context has not unified the Russian commemorative landscape; in some cases, it has even intensified existing fractures. Third, the more marginal nationalist groups are, the more critical a tone they can have towards the Kremlin. However, fully anti-Kremlin rhetoric and action is only possible if actors are outside Russia, as demonstrated by the example of pro-Ukrainian groups, such as RDK.

Among its several limitations, this study cannot serve as a measurement of how celebration narratives around the four holidays are perceived and accepted by the wider Russian public. Such questions need different research methodologies, including large-scale surveys. The aim of this paper was to identify divergent narratives regarding national holidays, not to evaluate their acceptance. Additionally, the research did not examine Russian state media, which likely presents a more homogenised version of the state narrative. Future research might examine how these commemoration narratives are accepted by the general public and how they differ across regions. Findings of this study can be helpful for scholars working on typologies of Russian nationalism, since they illustrate not merely ideological, but also commemorative and mnemonic differences, providing an additional layer for differentiation.

This study demonstrated that Russia's national holidays function as "litmus papers" (McCrone and McPherson 2009), revealing the values and key narratives of state and nationalist actors. These holidays are neither stable vehicles for collective memory, nor simple propagandistic instruments of the Kremlin. They are "unstable signifiers" (Geisler 2009), the academic value of which lies precisely in this instability, since they uncover the fractures within Russia's commemorative landscape. Russian nationalists and the state appear united on the surface in the war against Ukraine – with the exception of the marginalised pro-Ukrainian camp – yet remain divided on the fundamental questions of national identity and the past that national holidays are supposed to resolve.

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Appendixes

Figures



Figure A1 – RDK Defender of the Fatherland Day poster. RDK, Telegram.

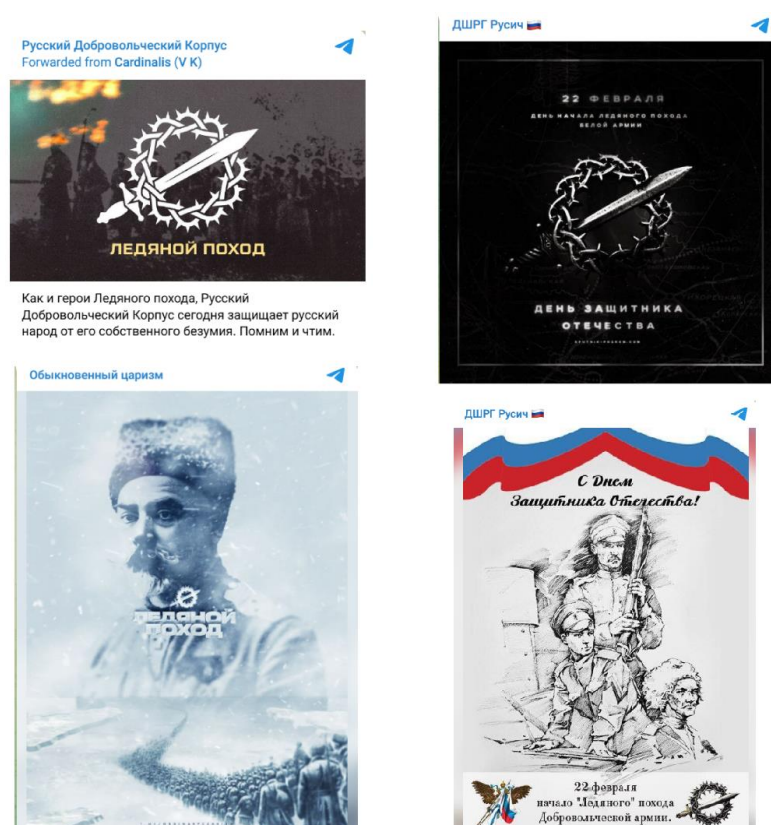


Figure A2 – Nationalist celebration cards of February 22, demonstrating the symbol of the Ice March. RDK (2024); Rusich (2026); Ordinary Tsarism (2023); Rusich (2025); Telegram screenshots.



Figure A3 – Victory Day celebration images demonstrating the narrative that so-called SVO is a continuation of GPW. *Russkii Mech* (2024); *Dvizhenie Sorok Sorokov* (2023); *Dvizhenie Tsarskiy Krest* (2022); *WarGonzo* (2025). Telegram screenshots



Figure A4 – WotanJugend May 9 card, demonstrating patches of the Slavic Nazi collaborator units. 2022. Telegram screenshot



Figure A5 – An image of Meliton Kantaria shared on ethnonationalist nationalist channels. Rusich (2024); Russkii Mech (2025). Telegram screenshot



Figure A6 – Russian MFA’s Russia Day celebration card demonstrating “Expulsion of Alien Enemies” schematic narrative template. 2022. Telegram screenshot



Figure A7 - a flag combining imperial and current tricolours, the Soviet flag, the St. George ribbon, Kolovrat – a symbol frequently used by Russian aryanists – and letters Z and V connected to the invasion of Ukraine. 2024. Telegram screenshot

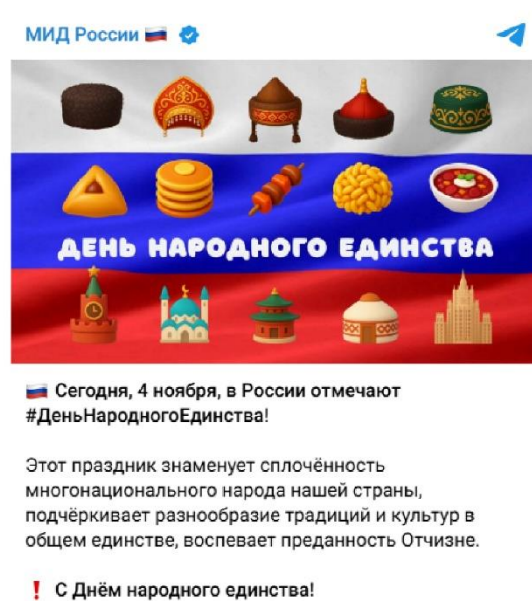


Figure A8 – Russian MFA’s Russia Day celebration cards with references of different ethnicities living in Russia. 2024; 2025. Telegram screenshots



Figure A9 – Nationalist cards celebrating National Unity Day carrying an Orientalist and sexist connotation, illustrating how these groups view ethnic Russian element. Ordinary Tsarism (2023); Mnogonatsional (2023); Tsarskiy Krest (2023); Russkii Mech (2025). Telegram screenshots

Table 1 – List of nationalist Telegram channels from which the data was extracted

Actor	Background
Dva Mayora (Two Majors)	Anonymous pro-Kremlin military Telegram channel providing updates on the war in Ukraine. Represents statist-nationalist positions broadly aligned with the official narrative. 1.16 million subscribers.
Dugin, Aleksandr	Eurasianist actor known for his radical rhetoric. Former member of the 1980s Russian far-right movement <i>Pamyat</i> and the National Bolshevik Party. Broadly aligned with the Kremlin's narratives, which he amplifies with radical and civilizational rhetoric. 98,000 Telegram subscribers.
Espanola	Former member of the 88th Reconnaissance and Sabotage Brigade "Espanola", formed by Russian football hooligans and involved in the invasion of Ukraine. The unit comprised not only far-right but also neo-Nazi elements, and later transformed into a union of veterans and football hooligans. 107,000 Telegram subscribers.
Mnogonatsional (Mnogonazi)	One of the biggest Russian anti-migrant channels with xenophobic content targeting migrants and ethnic minorities. A semi-opposition nationalist actor that tends to criticise the government mostly on ethnic and immigration issues. 400,000 Telegram subscribers.
Movement Sorok Sorokov (Dvizhenie Sorok Sorokov)	Ultra-Orthodox movement, established in the early 2010s. Rarely criticises government institutions, except on issues such as the neglect of Christian symbols. 45,000 Telegram subscribers.
Movement Tsarskiy Krest	<i>Dvizhenie Tsarskiy Krest</i> (the Movement of the Cross of the Tsar) is known for its ultra-Orthodox, radical-tsarist views. The last Romanov tsar, Nicholas II, is at the center of the group's mythology. 21,000 Telegram subscribers.
Ordinary Tsarism	Tsarist movement established a day after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The group calls for the proclamation of the Russian Empire and the establishment of a new ruling dynasty. The movement can be classified as mid-opposition, due to their critical framing of ethnic and memory politics in Russia. 43,000 Telegram subscribers.
Pryamoie Deystvie (Direct Action)	Telegram channel of The Other Russia of E. V. Limonov – an unregistered party of National Bolsheviks and an heir to the National Bolshevik Party, widely known as <i>Natsboly</i> . The group draws on the ideas of its founder, Eduard Limonov, who died in 2020. <i>Natsboly</i> are known for their firm criticism of the Kremlin, while supporting the war in Ukraine. 14,700 Telegram subscribers.
Reverse Side of the Medal	Anonymous Telegram channel dedicated mostly to the war in Ukraine. The administrator of the channel was connected with another Z-blogger, Vladlen Tatarsky, assassinated in Saint Petersburg. The channel also had connections with Wagner Group, posting exclusive images of its members and operations. RSotM remains moderately critical of the Kremlin, calling for radical escalation in Ukraine. 216,000 Telegram subscribers.
Rogozin, Dmitry	Co-founder and former leader of the far-right Rodina party, Dmitry Rogozin became an establishment nationalist. He held several government positions and served as General Director of Roscosmos. Now Rogozin is a Russian Federation Senator from the occupied Zaporizhzhia Oblast and commander of the BARS-SARMAT Centre of Unmanned Systems. 90,000 Telegram subscribers.
Rusich Group	Sabotage Assault Reconnaissance Group (DSHRG) <i>Rusich</i> is a small neo-Nazi unit commanded by the neo-Nazi Aleksei Milchakov. The group's members participated in the war in Donbas from 2014. <i>Rusich</i> fought in the ranks of

	Wagner Group as well, participating in their Syrian campaign. 239,000 Telegram subscribers.
Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK)	Russian Volunteer Corps is a unit of fully oppositional Russian nationalists fighting on the Ukrainian side. Its leader is football hooligan and neo-Nazi-affiliated Denis Nikitin (Kapustin). The group gained international attention during its raids on Russia's Bryansk and Belgorod Oblasts in 2023–2024. 117,000 Telegram subscribers.
Russkaya Obshchina	<i>Russkaya Obshchina</i> (Russian Community) is an anti-migrant traditionalist movement that appeared in 2020. Unlike previous anti-migration movements, <i>Obshchina</i> maintains a generally pro-Kremlin stance. Members of the group cooperate with police officers on raids against migrants. 600,000 Telegram subscribers.
Russkii Mech (Russian Sword)	<i>Russkii Mech</i> is another anti-migrant and anti-ethnic minorities movement. The group is more critical of the Kremlin than other similar movements. 174,000 Telegram subscribers.
Russian Imperial Movement / Imperial Legion	Russian Imperial Movement is an Orthodox-fundamentalist, tsarist ultra-nationalist organisation which was established in 2002. The group and its military wing Imperial Legion, which participates in war in Ukraine from 2014, are firm critics of the Kremlin. RIM – 4,300 Telegram subscribers; Imperial Legion – 5,500 Telegram subscribers
Strelkov (Girkin), Igor	Igor Strelkov is a former FSB officer who led the 2014 assault on Sloviansk, the first large-scale military clash between Ukrainian forces and Russian proxies. Girkin was leading the Club of Angry Patriots, a nationalist organisation critical of the Kremlin that called for more radical action. In 2023, Girkin was arrested on charges of extremism. His Telegram channel is managed by his wife, Miroslava Reginskaya. 367,000 Telegram subscribers.
Severny Chelovek (Northern Man)	<i>Severny Chelovek</i> (Northern Man) is another nationalist, anti-immigrant movement founded in 2022. However, the study demonstrated that the group does not have a distinct political agenda and is not a firm critic of the Russian government outside of the migration issue. 116,000 Telegram subscribers.
Tsargrad Society / Konstantin Malofeev	Tsargrad Society is a tsarist, Orthodox organisation founded by oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who in 2015 also established a TV channel of the same name. Both the organisation and Malofeev's personal channel deploy Eurasianist civilisational narratives, frequently forwarding each other's content. Tsargrad Society – 7,400 Telegram subscribers; Malofeev – 1.4 million subscribers.
WarGonzo	WarGonzo is a Telegram channel of a state-affiliated Z-blogger Semyon Pegov. The channel, which is concerned with war in Ukraine, serves as a propaganda tool for the Kremlin. 759,000 Telegram subscribers.
WotanJugend	WotanJugend is a pro-Ukrainian neo-Nazi organisation of Russian musician Aleksei Levkin. Levkin is affiliated with RDK. 24,500 Telegram chat subscribers.

Table 2 – Codebook

Code	Name	Definition	Examples from Data
CATEGORY 1: HOLIDAY FRAMING – <i>status and function of holidays</i>			
1.1	Holiday Acceptance	The actor accepts the holiday as legitimate and celebrates it without questioning its historical origins or official framing. The holiday is treated as genuinely meaningful.	Dva Mayora, Russia Day 2023: <i>“Happy Russia Day, comrades!”</i>
1.2	Holiday Rejection	The actor fully rejects the holiday as illegitimate, or a product of enemy ideology. The very existence or origin of the holiday is contested.	RIM, Defender Day 2024: <i>“February 23 is a day of shame”.</i> Strelkov, Russia Day 2023: <i>“I traditionally do not congratulate anyone on the ‘day of liberation from common sense.’”</i>
1.3	Holiday Redefinition	The actor retains the date but reframes it with an entirely new meaning, one not necessarily at odds with the official narrative.	Russkaya Obshchina, Defender Day 2026: <i>“Modern Russian history has filled this holiday with new important meanings. February 22–24, 2022, are the dates of the preparation and beginning of the ‘special military operation.’”</i>
1.4	Alternative Holiday Celebration	The actor celebrates a different historical event on or near the official holiday date, effectively replacing the state holiday with their own commemorative practice.	RDK, Defender Day 2023: <i>“The Russian Volunteer Corps proclaims February 22nd as Defender of the Fatherland Day – the day marking the beginning of the first Kuban ‘Ice’ Campaign”.</i> Pryamoie Deystvie, Unity Day 2022: <i>“The true Day of National Unity is November 7 – the day of the Great October Socialist Revolution”</i>
1.5	Holiday Corruption / Theft	The actor frames the holiday as having been stolen from Russians or its original	Russkaya Obshchina, Unity Day 2025: <i>“The Bacchanalia of ‘Peoples-Friendship’: Why Are</i>

		meaning corrupted by the regime's "multinational" or liberal agenda.	<i>the Meaning and Substance of a National Commemorative Date Being Diluted?"</i>
CATEGORY 2: HISTORICAL NARRATIVES AND MEMORY – <i>identity, statehood, historical continuity</i>			
2.1	Historical Continuity Chain	The actor constructs an unbroken chain of Russian military defenders across centuries, linking ancient, medieval, imperial, Soviet, and contemporary warriors into a single tradition. Statehood is presented as continuous and eternal.	Dugin, Defender Day 2026: <i>"We are descendants of the heroes who defeated the Cumans and the Khazars, destroyed countless Mongol hordes, broke the Livonians and the Swedes, the cunning Poles, the French, and the Third Reich."</i>
2.2	Privileged Event Narrative – GPW	The Great Patriotic War is treated as the supreme historical reference point – the privileged event narrative (Wertsch) against which all other events are measured, and through which current events, including the SVO, are interpreted.	Putin, Victory Day 2025: <i>"Today, we are all united by the feelings of joy and grief, pride and gratitude, and admiration for the generation that crushed Nazism and won freedom and peace for all humanity at the cost of millions of lives".</i> Dva Mayora, Victory Day 2023: <i>"Today is the most important holiday for our country".</i>
2.3	GPW as Tragedy for Russians	The actor frames WWII not as a triumph but as a tragedy specifically for the Russian people, emphasising disproportionate Russian losses, Soviet responsibility for unnecessary deaths, or rejecting the "victory cult". Directly challenges the privileged event narrative.	RIM, Victory Day 2023: <i>"For the Russian people, the Soviet–German war was the greatest tragedy".</i> Tsarskiy Krest, Victory Day 2023: <i>"One of the most terrible wars of the 20th century became one of the greatest punishments of the Russian people".</i>
2.4	White Movement Invocation	The actor invokes the White Movement, the Ice March (1918), or the Volunteer Army as the true defenders of Russia, positioning them as morally superior to the Bolsheviks and the Red Army.	RDK, Defender Day 2023: <i>"they were the last defenders of the Fatherland, for they alone remained faithful to their people when it had lost its mind".</i>

2.5	Pre-Revolutionary Golden Age	The actor frames the Tsarist period Russia as the authentic original Russian civilisation – the standard against which all subsequent periods are measured and found lacking. In some cases, the last tsar Nicholas II is worshiped as a divine ruler.	RIM, Victory Day 2025: <i>“It was precisely the strategic legacy of Emperor Nicholas II that played the decisive role in the victory over the Third Reich. Glory to Emperor Nicholas II!”</i>
2.6	1612 Liberation as Template	The actor invokes the 1612 liberation of Moscow from Polish forces as a narrative template for current events, drawing parallels between then and now regarding elite betrayal, foreign occupation, and popular uprising.	Mnogonatsional, Unity Day 2022: <i>“Russian civil society... was able to unite and stand against a government that decided to sell itself out to its ‘respected Western partners.’ Is this relevant today? Of course. It is always relevant!”</i>
2.7	SVO as Continuation of GPW	The actor frames the so-called SVO as a direct continuation of the Great Patriotic War – the same enemy, same struggle, same existential threats.	Dugin, Victory Day 2024: <i>“1941-1945 and 2022-? are the same war”</i>
2.8	Rejection of the Soviet Past	The actor rejects the Soviet period as illegitimate, anti-Russian, or as a form of internal occupation. Bolshevism is framed as alien to authentic Russian civilisation.	RIM, Defender Day 2024: <i>“This is how Russophobes turned Russians into Soviets, and then into ‘Rossiyan’ aborigines”.</i>
2.9	Incorporation of the Soviet Past	The actor incorporates the Soviet period and its achievements into a broader Russian historical narrative without fundamental critique. Soviet and pre-Soviet history are treated as one continuous story.	Pryamoie Deystvie, Defender Day 2025: <i>“On February 23, 1918, our socialist fatherland created its first regular armed forces”.</i>
2.10	Selective Engagement with the Soviet Past	The actor neither fully accepts nor fully rejects the Soviet period but selectively engages with it – accepting certain achievements while criticising others (ideology,	Espanola, Russia Day 2025: <i>“We do not accept the Bolshevik path... But we do not deny the achievements of the Soviet people – both Gagarin’s flight and the victory in the Second</i>

		repressions, anti-religious policies).	<i>World War are all ours, Russian (Russkoie)!!</i>
2.11	GPW as Tragedy for Europe	The actor frames the Allied victory in WWII as a tragedy for European civilisation – mourning the defeat of the Axis cause as a loss for European idealism, spirituality, or civilisational integrity. Represents the most radical form of Privileged Narrative Reversion.	WotanJugend, Victory Day 2023: <i>“May 9 is the day of Europe’s funeral, the day of sunset, the day of a bloody eclipse – the sun has set, the heroes have died, the gods have fallen asleep”.</i>
2.12	White Movement Heritage Claim	The actor claims the heritage of the White Movement as their own living political and spiritual tradition, positioning their current movement as a direct continuation of the Volunteer Army.	RDK, Defender Day 2025: <i>“The Russian Volunteer Corps continues their cause today”.</i> Ordinary Tsarism, 23 Feb 2024: <i>“The White Cause lives on... The White Cause lives on when Igor Strelkov, with a detachment of 52 men, takes Sloviansk”.</i> WotanJugend, Defender Day 2022: <i>“The Ice March continues. It is eternal, like the immortal soul within people”.</i>
2.13	The Fall of the Soviet Union as a National Tragedy	The actor frames the fall of the Soviet Union as a tragedy that divided the Russian (Russkii) people.	Russkaya Obshchina, Russia Day, 2025: <i>“And if during the USSR the country was perceived as a ‘single whole,’ then after the signing of the so-called Belovezh Accords, millions of Russian people were left outside the ‘new Russia.”</i>
CATEGORY 3: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION – “US” – <i>visions of Russian identity</i>			
3.1	Civic-Multinational “Us” (Rossiiskii)	“Us” is defined as all peoples of Russia regardless of ethnicity or religion, united by shared citizenship,	Putin, Victory Day 2022: <i>“Fighters of different nationalities stand together in battle, shielding each other from bullets and shrapnel like brothers. And in this lies</i>

		patriotism, and common destiny.	<i>Russia's strength, the great, unbreakable strength of our united multinational people."</i>
3.2	Ethnic 'Us' (Russkii)	"Us" is defined primarily through ethnic Russian identity. The Russian people (russkii narod) are foregrounded as the core nation – the primary bearers of sacrifice, achievement, and historical continuity. Contests the <i>rossiiskii</i> model.	Ordinary Tsarism, Victory Day 2025: <i>"The victory was achieved precisely by the Russians, not by the communists, not by the Soviet state, and not by Stalin"</i> RIM, Unity Day 2022: <i>"Russia was formed as a monoethnic and monoconfessional unique state of a single Russian Orthodox people"</i>
3.3	Orthodox "Us"	"Us" is defined through Orthodox Christianity as the core of Russian identity. Orthodoxy is presented as the spiritual foundation of Russian civilisation, military victories, and national destiny.	RIM, Unity Day 2022: <i>"Unity for us can exist only in Christ!"</i>
3.4	Civilisational "Us"	"Us" is defined as a distinct civilisation with a universal eschatological or spiritual mission – Russia as the Third Rome, Katechon, or the last bastion against global evil. Encompasses but goes beyond ethnic and Orthodox identity toward a cosmic civilisational claim.	Malofeev/Tsargrad, Defender Day 2024: <i>"There is nowhere to retreat, for behind us stands the Third Rome... our country is the 'last trench' of the true faith"</i>
3.5	European "Us"	Russia is imagined as a part of European culture and heritage.	Russkii Mech, Russia Day 2025: <i>"We honor our country, White Russia, the heir to a rich European culture and a great civilization"</i>
CATEGORY 4: ENEMY AND "OTHER" CONSTRUCTION – <i>visions of identity and statehood</i>			
4.1	External Enemy – West	The West, NATO, or "collective West" is framed	Putin, Russia Day 2023: <i>"the Horde, arrogant and cruel as it</i>

		as the primary and eternal external enemy threatening Russia's existence, sovereignty, or civilisation. Activates step 2 of the Expulsion of Alien Enemies template.	<i>was, never threatened our greatest treasure – our language, traditions, and culture, something the Western conquerors were eager to suppress”</i>
4.2	External Enemy – Ukraine / Neo-Nazism	Ukraine or the Ukrainian regime is framed as a neo-Nazi, puppet, or artificially created enemy – the contemporary manifestation of the alien force expelled in 1945, now requiring a new expulsion.	Tsargrad, Victory Day 2023: <i>“Ukrainian nationalists openly call for the genocide of Russians. But they, like their predecessors, will be defeated”</i>
4.3	Internal Enemy – Bolshevism / Soviet Legacy	Bolshevism, the Soviet regime, or the communist legacy is framed as an alien force that invaded and occupied authentic Russian civilisation from within. Represents a modified application of the Expulsion of Alien Enemies template with an internal alien.	Sorok Sorokov, Russia Day 2024: <i>“Western Marxist Russophobic Bolsheviks seized thousand-year-old Russia, Holy Rus’, in 1917”</i>
4.4	Internal Enemy – Liberal Elite	The post-Soviet liberal elite, the Yeltsin era, or the 1991 dismemberment of the USSR is framed as betrayal of the Russian people and continuation of anti-Russian governance.	Dugin, Victory Day 2024: <i>“The liberal Westernists headed by Yeltsin, sheer traitors and abettors of the geopolitical foe, dealt a second strike and brought down the USSR”</i>
4.5	Internal Enemy – Current Regime	The current Russian government is framed as occupiers, enemies of the Russian people, or a continuation of anti-Russian governance. Applies the internal alien modification of the Expulsion template to the present-day state.	RDK, Unity Day 2023: <i>“Who sits in the Kremlin now? Occupiers with dual citizenship... A cosmopolitan clique of oligarchs”</i>
4.6	Internal Enemy – Ethnic Minorities / Migration	Non-Russian ethnic minorities, migrants from Central Asia or the Caucasus, or mass migration	Russkii Mech, Unity Day 2024: <i>“Russian faces are already in the minority (kneeling in the center,</i>

		policy is framed as a threat to Russian ethnic identity, cultural survival, or physical safety.	<i>like a trophy of primitive barbarians)</i> ”
4.7	Anti-Semitic Framing	The actor uses anti-Semitic tropes, highlights the Jewish origins of Bolshevik leaders, or frames Jews as behind Russia’s historical misfortunes.	Tsarskiy Krest, Victory Day 2023: <i>“Zhidobolshevism”</i>
4.8	Ukrainians as Traitors / Separatists	The actor frames Ukrainians or the Ukrainian state project as traitors to the common Russian-Ukrainian heritage, as separatists who broke away from a unified Russian state.	RIM, Russia Day 2024: <i>“Russia is waging a just war of liberation against separatist occupiers of Russian lands and cities”</i>
4.9	Traitors of the Fatherland	The actor frames Russians or members of former subordinated nations who fight against Russia as traitors. Includes the contemporary RDK fighting on Ukraine’s side, historical Vlasov’s ROA, and Baltic or Ukrainian SS divisions.	Reverse Side of the Medal, Unity Day 2024: <i>“It’s like the RDK or the Vlasovites of the 17th century. Together with the Poles, the Cherkasy are ravaging Russian lands. That is, the Little Russian Cossacks. In our view, the equivalent of the Ukrainian Armed Forces”</i>
CATEGORY 5: WAR / SVO FRAMING – <i>how the template is applied to current conflict</i>			
5.1	SVO as Defensive Response	The SVO is framed as a defensive, forced, or preventive measure against external aggression. Corresponds to step 1 (peaceful Russia) and step 2 (unprovoked attack) of the Expulsion of Alien Enemies template.	Putin, Victory Day 2022: <i>“Russia delivered a preemptive rebuff to aggression. It was a forced, timely, and the only correct decision”</i>
5.2	SVO as Sacred / Eschatological War	The SVO is framed as a sacred, spiritual, or eschatological struggle – a battle between good and evil, God and Satan, civilisation and barbarism. Connects to the NNP (Third	Dugin, Unity Day 2022: <i>“SVO is the field of Armageddon itself. The final battle”</i>

		Rome / Katechon) framework.	
5.3	SVO as National Liberation	The SVO is framed as a war of liberation – liberating Russian lands, Russian people, or Russia itself from foreign control, separatist occupation, or neo-Nazi governance.	Tsargrad, Defender Day 2024: <i>“Russia began a national liberation special military operation”</i>
5.4	War Conduct Criticism	The actor criticises how the war is being conducted — incompetent commanders, ‘meat assaults,’ Soviet-era tactics, unnecessary losses, corruption among the military leadership.	RIM, Defender Day 2025: <i>“The Soviet army still advances in columns with the red flag in frontal assaults under the leadership of ‘red commanders’”</i>