



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

**CERC WORKING  
PAPERS SERIES**

**No. 1 / 2005**

**Jonathan Clarke**

**LANGUAGE AND  
THE  
CONSTRUCTION  
OF IDENTITY IN  
RUSSIA**





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**ISSN 1447-0071**

*Published by the Contemporary Europe Research Centre in December 2005.*

## 1. Language and the Construction of Identity

Language and identity are closely connected. The study that follows attempts to elucidate the complex function of language in the construction of identity in post-Soviet Russia and to place this in some kind of historical perspective. It examines the lexicon of contemporary standard Russian and the terms used to denote nationality and ethnicity. It argues strongly that the semantic distinctions drawn by these terms are difficult to translate and to convey succinctly outside Russian, though an understanding of the fundamental conceptual structure underlying the terms is vital for an accurate interpretation of Russian political thought. What is the significance of the difference in terminology when Putin is styled *rossiiskii prezident* but the language he speaks is called *russskii yazyk*?

While the study focuses primarily on the use of language to express identity in Russia, it is also concerned with the broader issue of the way in which we represent what is foreign and unfamiliar when describing a group or nation to which we do not belong. Do we construct an image of the group or nation that seeks to allow it to speak for itself or do we seek to impose on the analysis preconceived categories that tend to confirm our own

prejudgements? Which aspects of the group or nation do we choose to emphasize or to ignore, and what determines our choice?

This may be termed the problem of the observer, since the position of the observer can have a profound effect on the representation of what is observed. This applies especially to the subject of identity. How the observer constructs his or her own identity has a direct bearing on how the identity of others is defined. The construction of a particular identity always implies the simultaneous construction of a corresponding complementary identity that defines those that stand outside the initial definition. And since it is not possible to adequately or simply represent the many characteristics of such a complex entity as a group or nation, there must be a strong element of selectivity in any representation. What is omitted may well be as salient as what is included, but may not serve the interests of an underlying predisposition. Whereas an account of statistical data must satisfy certain precise conditions of representation (in terms of sample size, and so on), an account of a group or nation is not subject to a similarly rigorous methodology and so can easily express a concealed bias. In the following remarks on language and identity in Russia it is hoped to offer a perspective that differs somewhat from the prevailing representation of Russia in the West.

Language is a critical component in the construction of identity. If identity is seen as a set of characteristics that define an individual or a group, then language is an important means by which these characteristics are communicated. At the level of the individual identity can be expressed through personal and family names which distinguish that individual from others in society. At the level of the ethnic group identity can be communicated through terms of ethnic affiliation which not only bestow membership on those within the group, but also exclude those deemed outside the group.

At the level of the nation or state membership can be defined as referring to those who are considered to be citizens, usually persons entitled to a passport. Membership of the nation is therefore determined in law. While nationality in this sense is a comparatively simple matter to determine, the way in which the identity of those belonging to the group is expressed beyond the term used to denote nationality is far from simple.

The question of language and its relation to the construction of identity raises many problems. One is the problem of methodology. How do we determine the meaning of the terms involved in this construction? The same term may well be understood differently by different speakers of the language and may indeed be deliberately manipulated to express a particular attitude or point of view. There

is a degree of variability in the use of terms. At the same time there is often a consensus or dominant interpretation of the meaning of terms which is expressed explicitly in dictionary definitions and implicitly in many published texts. In the analysis that follows the dominant interpretation will be elucidated as far as possible, while allowance is made for the possibility of other interpretations that appeal to smaller constituencies.

The problem of the meaning of the terms used to express identity relates not only to the matter of their wilful distortion. It also involves the issue of polysemy. Some terms may have multiple meanings, of which one may be primary, though all are recognized as possible interpretations. In this case care must be taken in the analysis to ascribe to the term the meaning intended.

A more subtle problem associated with language and the construction of identity relates to politics and the exercise of power. For the political environment has a strong influence on the use of language and the way in which terms are deployed, often with far-reaching consequences for large sections of the population. Even the meaning of terms can be conditioned by the political context in which they operate, so that the dictionary definition becomes overlaid with implicit constraints imposed by the political system. Many state constitutions, for example, proclaim ideas of liberty,

equality and justice that are frequently compromised by the political environment. The mechanisms involved in this process deserve close and systematic investigation, if the functioning of language in the expression of identity is to be understood.

In the study that follows an attempt is made to elucidate the relationship between language and the construction of national and ethnic identity in post-Soviet Russia. It is based on material contained in published sources. The analysis focuses on a small set of key terms in contemporary standard Russian and the way in which they are deployed in reference to identity. This entails both a synchronic and diachronic approach, since the terms used show a remarkable development and redevelopment over a relatively small period of time that demands an account of their history. The changes reflect shifts in the construction of identity accompanying significant political transformations.

The study relates to four main periods in the history of Russia which range from the eighteenth century to the present day. The periods are as follows: the post-Soviet era, the Soviet era, the period of the Russian Empire from 1812 to the Revolution of 1917, and the post-Petrine period of the Empire before 1812. It will be observed that the beginning of each of these periods is marked by a cataclysmic event or series of events: the collapse of the USSR, the Bolshevik Revolution, Napoleon's invasion, and the revolution of Peter the Great. It will be

contended that these events and their aftermath have significantly affected the construction of identity in Russia as reflected in the language.

More generally it can be argued that widespread lexical change has frequently accompanied major historical transformations in Russia. And questions of language and problems of lexicon have occupied a dominant position in Russian intellectual discourse. Serious political discussions have often been transposed and conducted as debates about language in which language serves primarily as a convenient point of reference. The deep structure of the debate lies beyond the surface structure of the linguistic issues that are raised.<sup>1</sup>

While the study is avowedly philological, it does not aim for a closed interpretation or a definitive account of modern Russian usage in discussions of identity. Such closure is not possible. The intention is as much to suggest new areas of investigation as to offer an accurate analysis. What is being emphasized here is the importance of language in the process of self-definition, the difficulty of translation and the critical role of the political environment in determining effective meaning.

In focussing on the lexicon it is hoped to prepare the way for a more thorough examination of the complex set of ideas around which the debate on identity in Russia revolves. Such notions as the state, the nation, the people are common currency in contemporary discussions and have an actuality not found in the West. But to understand these discussions, which are often

characterized by high seriousness and deep passion, it is first necessary to be aware of the specific linguistic dimensions.

The emphasis that is placed in this study on language is not accidental. It reflects the view that language holds the key to an understanding of culture and offers a pathway to the realm of ideas. The underlying assumption is that Russian notions of identity cannot be explained adequately without a detailed analysis of the terms used to express those notions. It is consistent with the approach to the investigation of culture elaborated by some contemporary linguists<sup>2</sup> and may be seen as reflecting the traditional concerns of philology.

While the study focuses on Russian, it raises important questions of comparative semantics that relate to the ways in which semantic distinctions are drawn in different languages. The construction of identity, whether of the individual or of the group, depends on the drawing of boundaries. Just as time and space may be configured differently in various languages, so too relationships of identity can be arranged in accordance with differing points of view. Here we may quote the famous words of Sapir: 'The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not the same world with different labels attached.'<sup>3</sup> Doubtless this statement requires qualification, since clearly these worlds are not discrete.

What cannot be ruled out is the hypothesis that identity represents a universal semantic field in the sense that a notion of identity is expressed by every language. And so the investigation of this field is central to a systematic account of semantic typology.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. National and Ethnic Identity in Eastern Europe**

In Eastern Europe and the territory of the former Soviet Union the problem of national and ethnic identity has a long and complex history. It was particularly acute during the last phase of the Russian Empire and may be seen as one of the critical issues surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union. In neither the Russian Empire nor the Soviet Union was the problem resolved in a way that ensured political stability. It remains a focus of discussion today in the independent states that emerged afterwards.

The central issue of identity confronting the newly independent states is a matter of definition. How is national identity to be defined and what is its relation to ethnic identity? In the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union the question did not arise in the same context, since both were multiethnic states in which ethnic identity was clearly subordinate and the possibility that ethnic identity might coincide with national identity did not exist. Each contained more than a hundred ethnicities - in the USSR there were officially 126.<sup>5</sup> At the same time not all ethnic groups enjoyed equal rights and the same social status. The subject of ethnicity was often suppressed

and the aspirations of various ethnic groups were frequently thwarted. In both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union the discussion of ethnicity was severely constrained by the dominant ideology which imposed a rigid and immutable conception of the nation on all citizens. Yet despite political suppression ethnicity remained a powerful and attractive marker of identity. Even the official Soviet ideology that gave primacy to class over ethnic origin as a personal characteristic was unable to eliminate a strong ethnic consciousness. This consciousness was often expressed in the works of Soviet writers, as in the following passage dating from March, 1980 by the prominent philosopher and social critic Aleksandr Zinov'ev. Author of the famous novel *Ziyayushchie vysoty (The Yawning Heights)*, Zinov'ev was committed to the cause of Russian ethnicity:

Before the Russian people (*rusским народом*) there is now a task that is entirely feasible and intelligible to everyone - to occupy a place within the structure of the Soviet empire that is proper for a great people. In concrete terms this denotes the competitive struggle of Russians (*rusских людей*) with the representatives of other ethnicities for better positions in life, for a higher standard of living, for posts, and for a contribution to the culture. Further, before the Russian people there is the task of winning a fitting place in world culture. This task is derived from the first, for only on condition of winning sufficiently strong positions within the country do the Russian people (*русский народ*) have a chance of making a more tangible contribution to world culture. And nationalistic ideas of all kinds can have success with the Russian

people only to the extent that they help individual Russians and their groups to achieve success in their life struggle.<sup>6</sup>

Now that the Soviet Union has disappeared, unresolved tensions surrounding the problem of national and ethnic identity have come to the surface. Each independent state must redefine national identity while still confronting the fact that its population contains different ethnicities. The same is particularly true of Russia. As the largest of the newly independent states in both area and population Russia has inherited much of the ethnic diversity that typified the Soviet Union. Within its borders there are over one hundred ethnic groups and a similar number of languages. This diversity is especially marked in the large cities, and also in the regions of the North Caucasus, Middle Volga and Siberia.

Yet in the case of Russia there is an important added dimension to the question of national identity that must be addressed. Whereas the other former Soviet republics have acquired a form of full sovereignty and independence which they did not know under the Soviet regime, Russia has also experienced a dramatic loss of status and a sharp decline in political influence. For during the Soviet period Russia and the USSR were often seen as coterminous. And the term *Rossiya* or *Russia* was frequently used as a substitute

for *Sovetskii Soyuz* or *Soviet Union*, even though the Russian Republic was merely one of its constituent republics.<sup>7</sup>

As a result the debate about identity in Russia is driven by the pressing need to re-invent the nation in a way not typical of the other former republics. At the same time the debate is characterized by a complexity of terms as well as ideas. Often these terms defy simple translation from one language to another, since the distinctions drawn in one language are not always readily drawn in other languages. The meaning of the debate cannot be conveyed easily outside the language of the debate itself. Even the ideas that are discussed hardly correspond to concepts that figure prominently in current Western discourse.<sup>8</sup>

### **3. Terms of Identity in Contemporary Standard Russian**

The set of terms in contemporary standard Russian that forms the focus of the analysis consists of two adjectives and two nouns very loosely considered pairs of synonyms, but more precisely to be regarded as pairs of contrasting paronyms. It is the complex use of these terms that permits a subtle construction of national and ethnic identity, but it is a use that can hardly be gauged from dictionary definitions. The two adjectives in the set are normally translated into English as 'Russian', into German as 'russisch'. One

is the adjective *rossiiskii*, the other is *ruskii*. In terms of word-formation the first derives directly from the noun *Rossiia* (English 'Russia'), the second from the noun *Rus'* (sometimes translated as 'Rus' and referring among other things to the medieval lands of the Eastern Slavs). Related to these two adjectives are two corresponding nouns: *rossiyanin*, which is derived from *Rossiia*, and *ruskii*, which functions as a noun while inflected according to the adjectival paradigm.

While all these terms are current in contemporary standard Russian and widely used, their currency and semantic range have varied greatly since the early eighteenth century. They have been deployed in different ways in different periods, reflecting shifts in the way in which identity has been conceived and expressed. In current usage terms once obsolete have been revived, so that to some extent the lexicon of the contemporary standard language recalls elements of eighteenth-century vocabulary.

In standard Russian of the post-Soviet period the first adjective, *rossiiskii*, is used officially to describe national identity in the sense of citizenship. On the other hand the second adjective, *ruskii*, describes ethnic identity. The first term covers all citizens of Russia without regard to ethnic origins. The second term is applied to those whose ethnic origins are deemed to be Russian. In this way

the language permits differentiation between national and ethnic identity, since the two groups denoted by the two terms overlap but do not coincide.

The native language of those considered to have Russian ethnicity is described as *russkii yazyk*, though not all those who speak Russian as their first or even sole language are deemed to be ethnically Russian. Language is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for membership of the ethnic group, since the criteria for Russian ethnicity relate to more than just language. Religion may also serve as a criterion. Even a person's surname can be taken as an indicator of ethnicity. This is encouraged by the fact that surnames in Russian carry distinct morphological markers relating to their linguistic provenance, so that it is relatively easy to determine a surname's ethnic origin. A particular suffix often indicates a particular ethnicity. Surnames with the suffixes *-in* and *-ov* are generally Russian in origin (*Pushkin, Grishin, Chekhov, Petrov*), those with *-enko* and *-chuk* are Ukrainian (*Bondarenko, Kravchuk*), those with *-shvili* and *-dze* are Georgian (*Abramashvili, Dumbadze*), and so on.<sup>9</sup> Those people who are held to have Russian ethnicity are designated by the noun *russkii*, while those who are considered citizens of Russia are designated by the noun *rossiyanin*. The term *russkii* thus functions as an ethnonym and as such may be applied to some living outside the borders of Russia.

It is highly significant that according to the Russian Constitution Russia has two official names: *Rossiya* and *Rossiiskaya Federatsiya*. The second name, which is conventionally but loosely translated into English as the Russian Federation, stresses the federal character of the state. It deliberately avoids the adjective *ruskii* in favour of the inclusive and non-ethnic term *rossiiskii* and therefore would be better translated as the Federation of Russia.<sup>10</sup> It recalls the official name of the Russian Republic during the Soviet period: *Rossiiskaya Sovetskaya Federativnaya Sotsialisticheskaya Respublika*, though at that time the adjective *rossiiskii* was not used to express nationality. This was conveyed by the term *sovetskii* in the sense of citizenship of the USSR.

The contemporary use of the adjective *rossiiskii* in standard Russian in opposition to the adjective *ruskii* represents a conscious attempt to distinguish formally between national and ethnic identity. To some extent it makes it more difficult to equate national and ethnic identities, since ethnicity is associated with the distinct term *ruskii*. Such differentiation at the formal level of the lexicon is highly unusual: in many European languages one term is used to refer to both identities and the sense of the term needs to be determined from its context. In many cases the context is insufficient to avoid ambiguity and confusion. Ukrainian, for

example, offers a striking contrast to Russian in deploying a single term to denote both nationality and ethnicity, though it is a closely related language. (In terms of a theory of semantics the problem that arises here is the absence in other languages of terms with the same application as *rossiiskii* and *russkii* in Russian.<sup>11</sup> This lack of semantic isomorphism is not merely of linguistic interest: it may have serious political consequences when Russian documents deploying the terms *rossiiskii* and *russkii* are mistranslated and misinterpreted.)

Although the potential for careful usage in contemporary standard Russian is evident from the vocabulary and can be illustrated with published texts, it is not clear that popular perceptions of identity differentiate in the same way. It is possible for individual speakers of the language to choose their own lexicon or manipulate the lexicon to create a specific construction of identity that satisfies their own prejudgements. A carefully formulated survey of a representative sample of the population needs to be conducted to determine the patterns of popular usage.

#### **4. Expressions of Identity in Post-Soviet Russia**

The published texts in contemporary Russia that best demonstrate a careful distinction between national and ethnic identity through the

deliberate use of the terms *rossiiskii* and *rossiyanin* in opposition to *russkii* as adjective and noun fall into two main groups. The first are official texts of the government of the Russian Federation. In these publications the imperative to differentiate between national and ethnic identity stems from the need to show consistency with the Constitution. For Article 3 of the Constitution places sovereignty and the sole source of power in the Russian Federation in the hands of a people defined explicitly as multiethnic:

The repository of sovereignty and the sole source of power in the Russian Federation is its multiethnic people (*mnogonatsional'nyi narod*).<sup>12</sup>

The possibility of national and ethnic identity coinciding is thus denied by the Constitution. But while the Constitution guarantees equal rights for all citizens of the Russian Federation without regard to ethnicity, it also affirms the integrity and inviolability of the territory of Russia. Thus, equality before the law is contingent on acceptance of the unity of the State. For some ethnic groups in Russia who perceive themselves as colonized the matter of their self-determination remains unaddressed.

The second group of texts that show a careful differentiation between national and ethnic identity are those written by sociologists (or about sociologists) attempting to provide a social

profile of contemporary Russia. The need to describe accurately the entire population often with reference to statistical data leads to consistent deployment of the term *rossiyanin*. In such accounts the question of ethnic identity has less importance than national identity, since the nation as a whole is being described. A typical example is an article published in February, 1998 in the newspaper *Literaturnaya gazeta* in which the Director General of the research foundation *Obshchestvennoe mnenie* ('Social Opinion') is interviewed. Even the title of the article uses the term *rossiyanin*: *Chast' rossiyan schitaet, chto ikh zhizn' stanovitsya luchshe. Éta chast' vse bol'she.*<sup>13</sup> ('A Portion of the Citizens of Russia Consider that Their Life is Becoming Better. This Portion is Getting Bigger and Bigger.') The text of the article also refers to *srednii rossiyanin* ('the average citizen of Russia') and to *rossiiskoe obshchestvo* ('society in Russia'). In publications where the author is less concerned with accurate social analysis both the terms *rossiiskii* and *ruskii* may appear, but with less precise differentiation.

A vivid illustration of the careful use of the term *rossiiskii* in opposition to the term *ruskii* is provided by V. Barkovskii and N. Doroshenko in their preface to the novel *Chechenskii tranzit*, published in 1995. Here the distinction is quite explicit and the inclusive meaning of *rossiiskii* is emphasized in a polemical statement that stresses the sacredness and equal value of both

Russian and Chechen lives. Whether or not these views are widely shared, the passage shows clearly the capacity of the language to differentiate precisely between ethnic and national identity.

This book is not about war, and was written before November, 1994, when none of us had even been pondering the possibility of a Chechen war. Why, what a war it is there – a slaughterhouse! - in which Russian people (*russkie lyudi*) make up most of those who have perished – old men, women and children. And once more an untruth – why Russian (*ruskie*)? All those who have perished are PEOPLE OF RUSSIA (*ROSSIISKIE LYUDI*)! It's precisely ethnic identity (*natsional'nost'*) that has no meaning here. Equally sacred to the authors are both the final-year student from the school from the distant Siberian village, who was killed on the very first day of the war and so did not even understand properly why, and the forty-year-old Chechen with the grenade thrower in his hands, who remained lying nearby – in fact he was defending his own home! As always the real murderers and criminals will stay aloof, having profited from the blood that has been shed.<sup>14</sup>

This passage not only illustrates the rhetorical power of the *rossiiskii/russkii* dichotomy, but also highlights the problem of finding an adequate English translation for the pair of adjectives. If one accepts the usual translation of *Russian* for both, the confusion of national and ethnic identities that results can seriously distort the meaning of a text. The Russian original has been translated and its meaning diminished in the process. This is a particularly acute problem in the case of those texts such as government documents

in which the deployment of the term *rossiiskii* in opposition to *russkii* is intended to convey the equality of all citizens of Russia before the law without regard to ethnicity.

Though the government strives for formal correctness in its use of the terms *rossiiskii* and *russkii*, certainly in official publications, the extreme nationalists ignore this distinction. They attempt to conflate the terms referring to ethnic and national identity, making *russkii* a prerequisite for *rossiiskii*. Such a position runs contrary to the standard interpretation of the meaning of these terms. Whether it represents wilful distortion or merely careless thinking is difficult to determine, but the confusion of national and ethnic identities is clear. It is even argued that Russian consciousness (*russkoe soznanie*) can be described as non-ethnic while linked to language and culture.

They do not understand that the so-called "mythologemes", the habit and desire of Russians (*ruskikh*) to see their state as independent and influential - and in this sense great - represent a qualitative feature of our consciousness as a people. Russian (*russkoe*) consciousness is not ethnic, of course it is tied to language and culture, but to a significant degree it is connected with the history of the state, with its victories.<sup>15</sup>

Such a construction of national identity seeks to deny the existence of a multiethnic state and renders largely superfluous the precise

differentiation allowed in standard Russian by deployment of the term *rossiiskii* in contrast to *russkii*. It corresponds to a model of the state that may be described as ethnic in opposition to the so-called civic model embodied in the Constitution of the Russian Federation and characteristic of Western Europe.

A third model of the state, which represents an attenuated version of the ethnic model and can be called imperial, is proposed when the meaning of the term *russkii* is extended to cover all the Eastern Slavs.<sup>16</sup> This use of the term confuses the specific with the generic and denies the separate ethnic identities of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians. At the same time it attempts to revive one of the meanings of the term *russkii* that was sometimes invoked in the nineteenth century. While the imperialism associated with this meaning may be explicitly acknowledged, it is also presented as benevolent and well-intentioned. And it is assumed to serve the best interests of all those who live within the empire. Such a point of view is eloquently expressed in an interview with the philosopher Fedor Girenok conducted in 2001.

I am an imperialist. For me Russia is an empire. It has been one and it will be one. Not Holy Rus', but an empire. ...

The Russians (*russkie*) have never been a nation. Imperial consciousness could have been replaced with national consciousness. But this has not been done. ...

In the empire we were all good neighbours. Are you a Buryat? Call in, you will be my guest. A Kirghiz? Come here! ... In fact the overwhelming majority in Russia are Russians (*russkie*). I don't want the Russians to be a nation. I am an advocate of the imperial Russian idea.

By the way, my surname is Belarusian. My father is from Chernigov, my mother from Tambov... For me Great Russians (*velikorossy*), White Russians (*belorusy*) and Little Russians (*malorossy*) are all Russians (*russkie*).<sup>17</sup>

From the observations made above it is clear that there is a striking correspondence between the three basic meanings assigned to the term *ruskii* and the three models of the state described as civic, ethnic and imperial. The first model is presupposed by *ruskii* as a specific ethnonym standing in opposition to *rossiiskii* as a term of nationality, the second by *ruskii* as a term of ethnicity and nationality subsuming *rossiiskii*, and the third by *ruskii* as a generic term denoting all the Eastern Slavs. Such a parallel relationship is remarkable.

What about popular usage? While it is difficult to characterize, it is possible to gain some conception of popular usage from the many examples of contemporary Russian given in the *Natsional'nyi korpus russkogo yazyka* [National Corpus of Russian], available at [www.ruscorpora.ru](http://www.ruscorpora.ru). A very telling example, even if atypical, showing clear differentiation between the terms *ruskii* and *rossiyanin* is the following sentence taken from an interview and

published in *Ékho Moskvy* in 2003. (The sentence represents the eighty-ninth entry for the noun *rossiyanin*.)

Ya ne étnicheski russkii, no ya rossiyanin, zhivu v étoi strane, moi predki zhivut zdes' s nachala veka. ('I'm not ethnically Russian, but I am a citizen of Russia, I live in this country, my forebears have lived here since the beginning of the century.')

What needs to be emphasized in this context is the fact that the debate about national and ethnic identity in Russia is complex, multifaceted and still evolving.<sup>18</sup> It involves not only a set of conflicting ideas, but also a set of terms whose meanings are contested by those taking part in the debate. Under these circumstances, where the standard meanings of the terms are not always accepted, the discussion acquires an added complexity. And the linguistic dimension of the debate must be elucidated if the dynamics of the discussion are to be properly represented.

## **5. Terms of Identity in Russian of the Soviet Period**

To understand the structural origins of the *rossiiskii/russkii* dichotomy in contemporary standard Russian it is necessary to examine the terms used to define identity in the Soviet period. For at the level of terminology an attempt was made during that period to distinguish between national and ethnic identity, even though

this often had little or no actual consequence in the harsh political reality of the Soviet Union. National identity in the sense of citizenship of the USSR was expressed by the adjective *sovetskii*, while ethnic identity in the case of Russians was conveyed by the adjective *ruskii*. The first was termed *grazhdanstvo*, the second *natsional'nost'*.

Already the structural similarity of Soviet with post-Soviet terminology is evident despite the lexical differences: the metaethnic terms *sovetskii* and *rossiiskii* stand in a similar relation to the ethnic term *ruskii*. If one seeks a possible explanation for this isomorphism, then it may be found in the customary conflation of Russia with the USSR in the Soviet era, so that both were viewed as one entity, at least by many Russians.<sup>19</sup> The fact that the Russian Republic represented merely one of the constituent republics of the USSR did not prevent the use of the term *Rossiia* as a substitute for *Sovetskii Soyuz*. Though erroneous, this usage influenced the functioning of the language and facilitated the transition to the present lexical dichotomy in standard Russian. The disappearance of the Soviet Union meant a loss of relevance for the term *sovetskii*, but the need for a metaethnic term of nationality remained. It has been filled in the post-Soviet period by the adjective *rossiiskii*. At the same time the structural similarity of Soviet and post-Soviet terminology, though significant from the

point of view of the history of the lexicon, should not obscure the critical and fundamental differences in the political environment. In the Soviet Union the absolute dominance of the Communist Party ensured that questions of ethnicity could be discussed only within the context of the official Marxist-Leninist ideology. And this maintained as one of its tenets that the Bolshevik revolution and the establishment of Soviet power had eliminated problems associated with the ethnic composition of the population. It pointed to the formally elaborate administrative structure of the Soviet Union as proof. There was therefore no reason to regard the matter of ethnicity as problematic in any way. What was significant in enforcing this argument were the references in the Soviet Constitution to the ethnic groups of the USSR, since these references allowed the matter of ethnicity to be officially acknowledged by the State and to be shown to be fully resolved. The statement in the Constitution that the polity of the Soviet Union satisfied the interests of all ethnic groups rendered any debate about ethnicity superfluous, even unconstitutional.<sup>20</sup>

While the adjective *sovetskii* referred to national identity in the sense of citizenship during the Soviet period, there was no single corresponding noun denoting a citizen of the USSR. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent replacement of *sovetskii* by *rossiiskii* in the construction of national identity in the

Russian Federation a corresponding noun also appeared: *rossiyanin*. This cannot be described as a neologism in the strict sense of a newly coined lexeme. Rather it represents the revival of a term that had fallen into obsolescence after the Revolution of 1917. In dramatic fashion the re-appearance of *rossiyanin* as an active element of the lexicon demonstrates the close connexion between political events and lexical change in Russia.

## **6. Terms of Identity in Russian of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries**

The revival of the term *rossiyanin* in contemporary standard Russian recalls the vocabulary of the eighteenth century. At that time both the adjective *rossiiskii* and the noun *rossiyanin* were widely used and the formal distinction between national and ethnic identity was less carefully observed. Even the Russian language tended to be described as *rossiiskii yazyk* and a grammar of the language as *grammatika rossiiskogo yazyka*. This tendency strengthened towards the end of the century, so that in a work like A.A. Barsov's *Rossiiskaya grammatika*, compiled during the 1780s, there is consistent deployment of *rossiiskii* where the contemporary language would use *ruskii*. Barsov's text offers many examples: *rossiiskaya azbuka* ('Russian alphabet'), *rossiiskie bukvy* ('Russian

letters'), *rossiiskii vygovor* ('Russian pronunciation'), *slova rossiiskie* ('Russian words'), *slovesniki rossiiskie* ('Russian writers').<sup>21</sup>

During the nineteenth century the term *russkii* extended its domain as identification of Russia with medieval Rus intensified. The distinction between national and ethnic identity began to be drawn more sharply possibly under the influence of the cataclysmic events of 1812 and their aftermath. Ethnicity came to be closely associated with the term *russkii* and from that time on the language was known as *russkii yazyk*. Hence the title *Sokrashchennaya russkaya grammatika* of A. Kh. Vostokov's famous grammar of 1831. (Compare the title of I. Ornatovskii's grammatical text *Noveishee nachertanie pravil rossiiskoi grammatiki, na nachalax vseobshchei osnovannykh* of 1810.) The terms *rossiiskii* and *rossiyanin* continued to be used but generally with reference to the nation rather than the ethnic group and in a more and more restricted domain as the century progressed. Thus the State was described as *Rossiiskoe gosudarstvo*, while the Empire and the Imperial House were termed *Rossiiskaya Imperiya* and *Rossiiskii Imperatorskii Dom*.<sup>22</sup>

Though the adjective *russkii* in the nineteenth century might combine with the noun *yazyk* to denote the Russian language in a way consistent with current usage, it was a polysemous lexeme that

could also be deployed in a much broader sense. In some contexts it might refer to all the Eastern Slavs taken as a group without differentiation. When it was used in this way, the phrase *ruskii yazyk* became an abstract metaterm to describe Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian which in turn were described as dialects or groups of dialects: *belorusskie narechiya*, *velikorusskie narechiya* and *malorusskie narechiya*. Thus the usage of *ruskii yazyk* as a generic metaterm could co-exist with its reference to a specific language. This was accepted during the nineteenth century despite the inherent inconsistency, as the entry for *Ruskii yazyk* in Volume 28 of the authoritative *Éntsyklopedicheskii slovar'* of Brokgauz Efron published in 1899 makes clear.

***Ruskii yazyk*** is a term used with two meanings. It denotes: I) the totality of the Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian dialects (*narechii velikorusskikh, belorusskikh i malorusskikh*); II) the contemporary literary language of Russia which represents in its foundations one of the Russian dialects (*velikorusskikh narechii*).<sup>23</sup>

At the same time the encyclopedia admits the possibility of Ukrainian being defined as an autonomous language.

The Ukrainian dialect (*malorusskoe narechie*) is considered by some to be an independent Slavic language...<sup>24</sup>

Just as the phrase *ruskii yazyk* could be used in the nineteenth century as a generic expression, so too could the phrase *ruskii narod*. In this case it referred to the Eastern Slavs as a single people while allowing for their division into Belarusians, Russians and Ukrainians. The language of this people was held to be *ruskii yazyk* in the sense of a set of dialects.<sup>25</sup> Such generic usage was strengthened by an apparent correspondence at the lexical level, where the basic form of the adjective *ruskii* contrasted with the derived and interrelated adjectives commonly used at that time with reference to Belarusians, Russians and Ukrainians: *beloruskii*, *velikoruskii*, *maloruskii*. Only the first of these adjectives, *beloruskii*, has retained its currency. (Even today the adjective *ruskii* can occur occasionally in certain fixed phrases and refer to *Rus'*. It has this connotation in the well-known saying *Kiev – mat' ruskikh gorodov*. This needs to be translated into English as 'Kiev is the mother of the cities of Rus.' Any allusion to Russian cities is misleading.)

Here it should be stressed that an understanding of the various possible meanings of the adjective *ruskii* in the nineteenth century is essential for a correct reading of texts of the period in the same way that a careful interpretation of the semantic difference between the contemporary terms *rossiiskii* and *ruskii* is necessary for an accurate reading of post-Soviet texts. Consider the following

sentence taken from the article entitled *Rossiia* in Volume 27A of the Brokgauz-Efron *Éntsyklopedicheskii slovar'* dating from 1899. The sentence can be seriously misinterpreted if the reader fails to observe that the term *ruskii* is used here in a generic sense and denotes all the Eastern Slavs. To equate the term *ruskii* with 'Russian' in this context distorts the meaning of the statement.

The population of the Russian Empire (*Ross. Imperii*), although not as mixed in composition as the population of the British Empire, which has possessions in all parts of the world and in all climatic zones, includes nevertheless a mass of peoples and dialects, with the significant predominance of the East Slavic element (*ruskogo élementa*) which embraces about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the population.<sup>26</sup>

In coming to be closely associated with ethnicity, the term *ruskii* was central to the lexical system of nineteenth-century Russian. It contrasted with *rossiyanin* as the noun of nationality, and also opposed another term used to denote those who stood outside the ethnic group, though living within the borders of the Russian Empire. This was the term *inorodets* which bore a similar semantic relation to *ruskii* as *inostranets* ('foreigner') bore to *rossiyanin*. Such a term is difficult to translate, though its sense can be gauged from the meaning of the phrase *inorodnoe telo*, translated as 'foreign body'. (The noun *inorodets* is now considered archaic, while the adjective *inorodnyi* continues in use.)<sup>27</sup>

Despite the changing terminology and shifts in meaning in the construction of national and ethnic identity in Russia the fundamental conceptual structure underlying the terms shows a common dichotomy from the nineteenth century through the Soviet period to the present day. Whether the state is constituted as the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation, the Russian lexicon formally differentiates between national and ethnic identity. What is significant are the very different political contexts in which this differentiation occurs, for the context determines the effectiveness with which the terms are used.

## **7. Identity and Identity Markers in Post-Soviet Russia**

So far this study has focused on the use of language in the construction of identity by considering the way in which certain key terms have been deployed in Russian as expressions of national and ethnic self-definition at different periods. This may be described as the denominative function of language in defining identity. Yet the identity of a group is established not only through the process of naming. It can also be expressed through explicit association with what may be termed identity markers. These do not need to be unique, but may be shared with other groups that are perceived to be related. They represent necessary, but not sufficient conditions

for membership of the group. While these markers do not delimit the group in the same way as the terms of identity already discussed, they are often denoted by terms used in slogans and mottoes intended to characterize the group. For example, the motto *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* may be seen to denote the identity markers of revolutionary France.

Every construction of identity requires its own identity markers. If the definition of national identity in Russia is to be distinct from that of ethnic identity, as presupposed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation and reflected in the use of the non-ethnic term *rossiiskii* in opposition to the ethnic term *russkii*, then there must be some identity markers associated with national identity distinct from markers of ethnic identity. A terminological difference is insufficient to sustain a concept of national identity that transcends the idea of ethnicity. What might these markers of identity be? The most obvious would seem to be the Constitution itself and the political system defined by the Constitution in all its aspects. In the case of Russia the Constitution has been written with great care and might well serve as an identity marker. Yet its status has been undermined by a number of factors. The previous Constitution of the USSR was seen by many as failing to guarantee the lawful conduct of political affairs, while in post-Soviet Russia there is also a widely held view of a discrepancy between the functioning of the

political system and the requirements of the Constitution. As in any constitutional democracy the experience of the citizens as they interact with the political process has a profound effect on the degree to which they accept the Constitution and the polity it defines as a marker of identity.

If the Constitution does not serve as a strong marker of national identity in Russia, then the quest for identity will encourage other markers to take its place. And there is a tendency for markers of ethnic identity to emerge as substitutes, since they are already well established as powerful labels of self-definition and have an emotional appeal and the weight of tradition that the recently written Constitution does not. This development leads in turn to confusion between national and ethnic identity, to blurring of the distinction between citizenship and ethnicity, and to conflation of the terms *rossiiskii* and *russkii*. The notions of national and ethnic identity will merge. This trend in Russia has already been observed by some commentators.<sup>28</sup> It can be linked to the widespread disillusionment with the political system following initial enthusiasm in the period immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Such a construction of national identity relies on ethnicity to provide its defining characteristics. It rejects the notion of a

multiethnic state and discards the Constitution and the political institutions it proposes as a possible identity marker. Instead it returns to older forms of identification such as religion and language. In this way Orthodoxy and Russian become identity markers and necessary attributes of those who are considered to fully represent the nation.<sup>29</sup> While those who lack these attributes are not disenfranchised, there is a sense in which they are deemed to be second-class citizens.

If one seeks an explanation for the prominence of Orthodoxy in this construction of national identity, then it should be remembered that the Orthodox Church represents one of the very few public institutions from pre-revolutionary Russia that has survived the cataclysm of the Soviet period and continues to exist in the post-Soviet state that emerged after the disappearance of the USSR. In a country where the political structures have been subjected to two radical revolutions in less than eighty years, and where the polity has been fundamentally altered as a result, the Church offers continuity with the past and a powerful means of self-definition.

But while Orthodoxy functions as an important identity marker in this construction, it does not mean that it is confined to this role or that this role adequately represents it. There are significant doctrines of Orthodoxy that make claims to universality and that

transcend notions of national and ethnic identity. Some within the Orthodox Church prefer to stress these doctrines, while others are more inclined to emphasize its national importance. (The formal view taken by the Russian government towards religion, including Orthodoxy, is strictly secular. The Constitution makes no provision for an established church and demands the absolute separation of church and state.)

Despite the strong attraction of a conception of the nation in Russia based on ethnicity the official position as expressed in the Constitution continues to assert the principle that national and ethnic identity must be differentiated. While the focus in this study has been on the terminology of identity, what remains to be investigated more fully is the deeper question of the dynamics behind the search for identity in Russia and the relationship between shifts in the construction of identity and political transformations. The meaning of the problem of identity demands its own analysis as much as the meaning of identity itself.

In summing up we may well pose the question: what important conclusions can be drawn from this investigation of the construction of identity in contemporary Russia? There are several.

- Language plays a critical role in the debate about national and ethnic identity. Not only are ideas contested, but also the meanings of terms used in the debate.
- It is impossible to adequately represent the debate in English without discussing the Russian terminology involved, since English fails to make the same semantic distinctions as Russian.
- Cataclysmic political events in Russia have produced important shifts in terminology.
- Despite the changing terminology of nationality and ethnicity in Russia the fundamental conceptual structure underlying the terms shows a common dichotomy from the nineteenth century through the Soviet period to the present day. Whether the state is constituted as the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation, the Russian lexicon formally differentiates between national and ethnic identity by offering a pair of terms that can be used in contrast with each other.

### **Endnotes**

I wish to acknowledge the help I have received from my colleagues, Serhy Yekelchuk and Peter Lentini, who offered critical commentary on a draft of this paper and provided advice and information.

1. For a penetrating examination of the role of language in the problematics of Russian culture see Yu.M. Lotman, B.A. Uspenskii, 'Spory o yazyke v nachale XIX v. kak fakt russkoi kul'tury ("Proisshestvie v tsarstve tenei, ili Sud'bina rossiiskogo yazyka " – neizvestnoe sochinenie Semena Bobrova),' *Trudy po russkoi i slavyanskoi filologii*, 1975, 24, pp. 168-322.
2. See the monograph by Anna Wierzbicka entitled *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German and Japanese* (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997). Here she examines the semantic range of Russian words relating to ideas of friendship, freedom, homeland and fatherland.
3. Cited in J. Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 432.
4. The complementary questions of semantic relativity and cultural overlap are discussed in J. Lyons, *op. cit.*, pp. 432-434.
5. *Spravochnik lichnykh imen narodov RSFSR* (Moscow, Russkii yazyk, 1979), p. 3.
6. A. Zinov'ev, *My i zapad* (Lausanne, Editions l'Age d'Homme, 1981), pp. 42,43.
7. While commentators have referred to Russia's loss of status after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they have not always stressed the negative psychological effect of this development, when

contrasted with the positive effect of gaining full sovereignty as in the case of the other former republics. See the article by Alexander Agadjanian entitled 'Religious pluralism and national identity in Russia' in *MOST Journal on Multicultural Studies*, 2001, 2, No. 2, available at [http://www.unesco.org/most/vl2n2aga\\_en.htm](http://www.unesco.org/most/vl2n2aga_en.htm)

8. The specificity of Russian culture and the problem of conveying the meaning of the Russian world-view in the terms of Western thought has been noted by Yu. M. Lotman and B.A. Uspenskii. In discussing the cultural background of the early nineteenth century they refer to *éta paradoksal'naya neperevodimost' nekotorykh korennykh chert russkoi kul'tury na yazyk obshcheevropeiskoi politicheskoi terminologii nachala XIX v.* ('this paradoxical untranslatability of certain basic features of Russian culture into the language of common European political terminology of the beginning of the nineteenth century'). See Yu.M. Lotman, B.A. Uspenskii, *op.cit.*, p. 171.
9. For a detailed study of Russian surnames see B.O. Unbegaun's definitive work, *Russian Surnames* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972).
10. In this study the translation 'Russian Federation' is used in deference to the official name in English adopted by the United Nations.
11. See the theory of semantics elaborated in J.Lyons, *op.cit.*

12. Constitution of the Russian Federation, Section 1, Chapter 1, Article 3, available at <http://www.gov.ru/main/konst/konst11.html>
13. *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 25 February 1998, p.5.
14. V. Barkovskii, *Chechenskii transit* (Moscow, Norma Press, 1995). I am indebted to Jeremy Dwyer for drawing my attention to this passage.
15. A. Tsipko, 'Dobrovol'naya sterilizatsiya,' *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 26-31 December 2001, p.1.
16. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between the three models of the state, constructions of identity and religious pluralism in post-Soviet Russia see A. Agadjanian, *op.cit.*
17. V. Polyakov, 'Russkaya filosofiya – lovushka dlya chudakov?' *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 5-11 December 2001, p. 11.
18. In describing the three models of the state some commentators have discerned a shift in popular support during the 1990s away from the civic model and in favour of the ethnic model, even the imperial. They ascribe this change to the failure to recreate the idea of the nation adequately after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 and to the continuing attraction of an ethnocentric conception of the state. See A. Agadjanian, *op.cit.*  
A note on sources: While this analysis is based largely on published sources, especially the newspaper *Literaturnaya*

*gazeta*, material illustrating the contemporary use of the terms *russkii*, *rossiiskii*, *rossiyanin* can also be found on the internet.

See, for example, the text available at

<http://www.hyperbook/1/index.php>

19. The close identification of Russia with the Soviet Union was not confined to popular thinking in Russia. It was also found in the West. Furthermore, it has persisted to this day in some circles. But it raises many conceptual problems. It allows the phenomenon of the Soviet Union to be simplified and to be presented as a Russian construct in the form of a new Russian Empire. It ignores the complexity of the USSR as a political entity and disregards significant aspects of its history.
20. See Article 1 of the Soviet Constitution (*Konstitutsiya [Osnovnoi zakon] Soyuza Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik* [Moscow, 1977], p. 7).
21. Not all Russian texts from the eighteenth and early nineteenth century show the consistency of usage found in Barsov's *Rossiiskaya grammatika*. Some demonstrate a continuing instability in the use of *rossiiskii* and *russkii* by deploying both in association with *yazyk* without differentiation. Thus in Semen Bobrov's *Proisshestvie v tsarstve tenei, ili Sud'bina rossiiskogo yazyka* of 1805 we find *rossiiskii yazyk* in the title, but *ruskoi yazyk* in the body of the text. From the context it is clear that both phrases refer to the contemporary Russian language.

22. In this way the adjectives *rossiiskii* and *russkii* were juxtaposed as attributes of nouns of different types. The first had a formal, official connotation, while the second was less abstract and more emotive. *Rossiiskii* qualified the more recently introduced noun *imperator* (emperor), *russkii* the older noun *tsar'* (czar).

23. *Éntsyklopedicheskii slovar'*, 1899, XXVIII, p. 564.

24. *Éntsyklopedicheskii slovar'*, 1899, XXVIIA, p. 142.

25. *Éntsyklopedicheskii slovar'*, 1899, XXVIII, p. 564.

26. *Éntsyklopedicheskii slovar'*, 1899, XXVIIA, p. 142.

27. It should be noted that the opposition of *inorodets* to *russkii* is the opposition of non-Slav to Eastern Slav, rather than non-Russian to Russian. Compare the misleading definition of *inorodets* in *Slovar' russkogo yazyka v chetyrekh tomakh I* (Moscow, Russkii yazyk, 1981), p. 669, where *russkii* is used in the modern sense. See also John W. Slocum, 'Who, and When, Were the *Inorodtsy*? The Evolution of the Category of "Aliens" in Imperial Russia,' *The Russian Review*, 57, no. 2 (1998), pp. 173-190.

28. See Note 16 above.

29. What these markers recall, at least partially, is the famous formulation of the nineteenth century that identifies the nation with the defining characteristics of *Samoderzhavie* ('Autocracy'), *Pravoslavie* ('Orthodoxy') and *Narodnost'* ('Ethnicity'). The last

of these characteristics is not specified, but can be equated with the term *ruskii*. For a contemporary discussion of this well-known formulation see V. Malukhin, 'Nash vybor,' *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 16 December 1992, p. 4.

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