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Nationalism is one of those modular phenomena that take on various forms depending on the political or cultural context. Although there is no one approach to the study of nationalism, few would question the enduring relevance of its central function—that of legitimizing the established political order. This is clearly shown in Katie Stewart's book, which goes beyond conventional studies of nation building in Western countries at the state level. It shifts the focus twice: by considering a non-Western, authoritarian, and multiethnic society—that is, Russia—and by moving beyond the Moscow-centric perspective to look at the (ethnic) periphery of the country.

Although nationalism constitutes a powerful legitimization strategy in autocracies like Russia under President Vladimir Putin, it does not necessarily generate uniform outcomes at the substate level. Based on a comparative study of three Russia's republics—Karelia, Tatarstan, and Buryatia—the book seeks to explore the variation in the effects of the Kremlin's messaging, “as regional elites adapt national narratives to their local contexts to enhance their resonance” (p. 6). These regions were not chosen randomly, as they are (supposed to be) home to particular ethnic minorities and “represent considerable variation in terms of size of the titular group, religious differences, levels of economic development, and geographic region” (p. 13). While part 1 presents the theoretical framework of legitimating nationalism and tests the theory using survey data, part 2 draws on data from fieldwork and online sources to examine the selected regions in four areas of symbolic politics: monuments, holidays, museums, and regional history textbooks. Overall, Stewart finds that legitimating nationalism, that is, nation-building efforts and symbolic policies, constitutes an “effective tool” and a “smart strategy” helping the Putin regime to retain power (p. 18). As Stewart puts it, this strategy “requires a careful balancing act” (p. 19) where the federal center allows “some accommodation of difference in the regions rather than ignoring demands for regional self-expression” (p. 199).

Chapter 1 presents a persuasive theory of nationalism as a legitimizing force, considering various parameters such as the type of regime, the mechanisms of legitimization, and (ethnic) federalism. Applying general theories to the case of Russia, Stewart distinguishes between four nation-building strategies at the regional level: assimilationist, accommodative, inclusive, and exclusionary (pp. 40–41). Stewart finds all in use in the Russian context, except for the exclusionary strategy—although this is not explicitly discussed. This is partly related to the case selection: While the book deals with strategies toward national minorities, it does not address those targeting minority groups stemming from (recent) immigration, who often find themselves excluded (cf. the recent ban on accepting immigrant children who do not have a “sufficient” command of Russian in public schools).

Chapter 2 discusses the results of original survey data Stewart collected in order to “explain the variation in citizens’ responses to central and regional identity work” (p. 52). The results highlight the role of ethnic identification in producing national pride and regional belonging, which in turn affect respondents’ assessments of the Putin regime and the country’s direction. Stronger national and regional attachment also increases the likelihood of voting for the presidential party, United Russia. That means that “Putin’s efforts to arouse legitimating nationalism are working” (p. 83). However, “nation-building tactics are not uniformly (in)effective” across ethnic and nonethnic regions (p. 52). Indeed, the survey administered through the Levada Center in August 2016 included not only the selected republics (Karelia, Tatarstan, and Buryatia) but also three (neighboring) oblasts—Murmansk, Samara, and Irkutsk. The limited sample size of the survey (around 230 respondents per region) nevertheless means that the results should be interpreted with caution, including when comparing regional variation.

Chapters 3 through 6 provide the results of an original cross-republican comparison based on qualitative data collected in 2014 and 2015–2016, when Stewart was deported from Russia “due to an alleged visa violation” (p. xiii). These results are particularly interesting and undoubtedly make a valuable contribution to understanding nation-building processes, and their regional variations, across Russia. Chapter 3 focuses on capital city monuments and provides an overview of symbolic landscapes in Moscow (monuments built during Putin’s third term, 2012–2018) and the three republican capitals: Petrozavodsk, Kazan’, and Ulan-Ude. Although all cities have monuments to World War II (or, rather, the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945) and to personalities like Vladimir Lenin and Alexander Pushkin, Stewart convincingly shows that in different regions people “experience slightly different visual imaginings of the nation” (p. 115), with Tatarstan’s monuments “potentially enhancing regional identification at the expense of the national identification” (p. 110). However, it remains unclear how the statues built before Putin’s rise to power, particularly those inherited from the Soviet era, would help us understand the current nation-building strategies on the regional level.

Chapter 4, the longest in the book, focuses on holiday celebrations in the three republics and considers holidays as “performative narratives” (p. 118). The cases for comparison include both national/federal holidays—Victory Day (May 9), established under Leonid Brezhnev in 1965, and National Unity Day (November 4), introduced by Putin in 2004—and a selection of regional holidays, both political (Republic and Constitution Days) and cultural (e.g., Day of Kalevala in Karelia, Sabantuy in Tatarstan, and Sagaalga in Buryatia). While celebrations of all-Russian holidays mirror those in Moscow, republican holidays emphasize—to varying degrees—the regional autonomy and cultural connectedness beyond Russia’s borders (Finnish culture, Islam and Turkic populations, and Buddhism and Mongol culture, respectively). Once again, Tatarstan’s holidays are “the most problematic” for the Kremlin’s central(izing) narrative (pp. 154–155). On the contrary, Karelia’s policies favor assimilation, while Buryatia “falls in between, with accommodation of ethnic and religious differences but limited accommodation of a regional political identity” (p. 155).

Chapter 5 shows that regional museums provide “closed”—rather than “open”—narratives, while engaging—in slightly different ways—with the Kremlin’s narrative of one thousand years of Russian statehood and unity (pp. 173–175). Museum attendance seems to have different impacts on national and regional pride among titulars and ethnic Russians living in these republics, with the probability of exhibiting a strong sense of pride tending to decrease among museum visitors (p. 160). Museal collections, however, follow overall nation-building strategies in republics studied here: an assimilation-cum-accommodation strategy in Karelia and Buryatia and an accommodation-cum-inclusion strategy in Tatarstan (p. 204).

Stewart draws the same conclusion from her comparative analysis of regional history textbooks in chapter 6. In 2015 the Russian Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Russian Historical Society prepared a national “cultural-historical standard,” which has increased pressure on regional narratives. The negative features of Russia’s development have been downplayed, while the overall positive effects emphasized. Thus, all the textbooks studied by Stewart describe the “stabilizing period” of Putin’s rule that followed a “period of crisis and instability in the 1990s” (pp. 194, 196). Despite some disparities, especially in the case of Tatarstan, all use the official word *prisoedinenie* (accession or joining) when referring to their respective republic’s integration into Russia.

In the conclusion, Stewart summarizes her findings regarding the regional variation in nation-building strategies and makes some updates in light of the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. She also reminds the reader that the Putin regime has been able to successfully legitimize itself through a combination of repression toward oppositional (including minority nationalist) actors and centralizing narratives.

Stewart has published an essential book that provides a better understanding of the sources of political stability in multiethnic and authoritarian states like Russia. Her work is based on an original research design and combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies and various data sources, including fieldwork observation and interviews with local actors. However, several elements seem to be missing from this valuable analysis, which would allow for further nuance.

First, and somewhat surprisingly, Stewart does not devote much attention to an opening question regarding the multiple interpretations of the Russian nation. The fundamental distinction between *ruskii* (“Russian” in an ethnic and/or cultural sense) and *rossiiskii* (“of Russia”)—well known to specialists of Russia but not so familiar to the general reader—is not clearly developed (pp. 4–5). And the (more) recent shift in the Kremlin’s discursive strategy, consisting in using *ruskii* as a synonym for *rossiiskii*, is not discussed in the book (for discussion of these issues, see Blakkisrud 2023; Laruelle et al. 2023). Stewart appears to consider Russia as a nation-state, ignoring the officialized discourse on Russia as a “state-civilization,” which tends to recode “nation” as “civilization” (Mjør and Turoma 2020).

Second, apart from a brief reminder in the conclusion, the question of ethnic mobilization and minority nationalism as a force of political delegitimation (Connor [1980] 2002) is not addressed in the book. Although this topic has already been explored in academic literature concerning Russia (see, e.g., Giuliano 2011), it would have been interest-

ing to revisit this in light of the regime's current repressive policies. Indeed, nationalism is used strategically not only by state and regional leaders, but also by ethnic entrepreneurs (Kolstø 2022). At the same time, exploring how nationalism fits into the broader repertoire that has helped the Putin regime to retain power, such as the co-optation of (regional) elites and the establishment of a values-based, "conservative" consensus, could have provided valuable insights (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2025).

Third, I would have liked to see Stewart's book engage in a dialogue with studies on ethnic minority activism, which have demonstrated that cultural and civil society organizations in the Russian Federation's republics have been disempowered and depoliticized (Prina 2016). While speaking of increasing central pressures, Stewart does not examine the controversial 2018 reform that ended compulsory teaching of minority languages in the republics' public schools (see Bowring 2018). This omission is all the more striking given that language remains a key identity marker for strong ethnic (and regional) identities. Similarly, there is no mention of Moscow's refusal to renew an agreement on delimitation of competencies with Kazan' in 2017, a step that partly contradicts Stewart's assertion that Tatarstan retains a "privileged position" in Russia (p. 211).

Finally, I miss more engagement with insights from the interviews Stewart conducted as well as more reflections on post-2022 changes, given that the book was published two years after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For instance, how do the Kremlin's national narratives depicting Russians and Ukrainians as "one people" and stating that Russia "protects" ethnic Russians in Ukraine resonate in Russia's republics?

Despite these remarks, Katie Stewart's book offers a high-quality and important study that decentralizes our view of Russian politics and highlights the importance of regional dynamics in authoritarian settings. It also opens up numerous perspectives for (comparative) research in the fields of nationalism and area studies.

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