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Contesting Definitions of the Contemporary Russian Nation: Formal Citizenship vs. Belonging to Socio-Cultural Communities

In previous times nations were mainly defined through individuals' membership in formal associations and institutes. However, in our post-modern era of comprehensive communicational networks and enhanced encounter of various populations and cultures, it is rather the belonging to socio-cultural communities that defines nations' boundaries. These global tendencies can be especially well seen in the current Russian nation-building process.

The Russian state is currently in the midst of a national consolidation

process, and is only realizing itself inside its state borders, which apparently do not completely coincide with its inner social fabric. Consequently, in recent years we are witnessing a growing and radicalizing Russian popular nationalistic discourse. It is predominately aimed against Muslim migrants of Caucasian and central Asian origin and excluding them from the Russian national collective. In other words, we note the emergence of a particularistic popular perception of the Russian nation, based on cultural and behavioral codes. It contests the official non-ethnic inclusive civic model promoted by the Kremlin.

This means that not all citizens of the Russian Federation are popularly

perceived as belonging to the Russian nation. Not surprisingly, growing segments of Russian population of various walks of life and political views are prone to xenophobic, predominately anti-Muslim, sentiments. What's more, a rapidly growing segment of the Russian public supports dissociation from the Russian Caucasus regions.

This process of exclusion derives from the formation of a popular image of a dangerous Muslim immigrant 'other', which in turn serves the consolidation of core Russian identity. Since nowadays Russian state is plagued by corruption, there is no law, nor order – and consequently no generally binding rules of social conduct. This brings about to the forefront unofficial customs and habits of behavior, highlighting differences in traditions and cultures between the indigenes and the newcomers.

Thus the 'other' is mainly defined through deviant behavior, contradicting the accepted local norms. Accordingly, the normative 'general public', while juxtaposed to aggressive 'other', is defined as 'Russians'. Such group-definitions mean that the current process of grass-root Russian

national consolidation is based predominantly on culture and culturally-based behavioral codes, rather than on mere ethnic or religious affiliation. The mainstream Russian public currently constructs its national identity through negation of properties of the perceived 'Muslim other'. Since the 'Muslim other' is perceived and defined mainly in terms of everyday customs and differences in modes of behavior, so is the Russian nation accordingly defined in socio-cultural terms.

We are here to suggest that when nations are in the midst of a nation-building or identity formation process, especially when as in the Russian case it is coupled with a poor governance and inner fragmentation, the formal state borders loose of their relevance, giving away to socio-cultural factors that define the actual national boundaries.