

**Russian Nationalism under Putin's Church-State:  
*Justifying Acts of Aggression Against Ukraine***

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**Working Abstract:** This paper aims to analyze President Putin's nationalistic rhetoric and its role in legitimizing Russia's aggressive international behavior, with a focus on the "Russian World" narrative encompassing Ukraine. The study draws on data from the Levada Center, Kasianenko (2021), Goudimiak (2014), and primary sources of Putin's own speeches to categorize and analyze Putin's speeches before and after key aggressive actions. The preliminary findings for the Crimean Annexion reveal dominant themes, including "Helping Ukrainian/Brother nation/Illegitimate coup" and "Projecting blame/Lack of dialogue." Putin's rhetoric intensifies during conflicts, indicating a correlation between nationalism and aggression. The Russian Orthodox Church significantly influences this rhetoric, bolstering Putin's domestic approval. Understanding the interplay of religion and state rhetoric provides valuable insights into Russia's authoritarian regime, its toolkit for engaging its audience, and the impact of nationalism on international relations. As of February 2023, 75% of Russians support the war against Ukraine, highlighting the effectiveness of Putin's nationalism in legitimizing these actions. The paper will contribute to predicting and analyzing Russia's behavior during times of heightened nationalistic pride, also calling for further research into the legitimacy of nationalistic claims and their impact on sovereignty and territorial disputes, both in the Russian-Ukrainian context and globally.

### Research Question:

There is a gap in the current academic and political writings about how the world has gotten to the point where Russia can attack and commit human rights atrocities against Ukraine with impunity; this is a problem because if Russia can do it, then what's to stop other countries from emulating their behavior? Besides the fear of financial and military repercussions from a country's allies, there is nothing stopping another authoritarian state from doing as Russia is. Consequently, it is important to understand how we got to this point where one of the world's superpowers can flagrantly attack and invade another country with impunity due to the threat of mutually assured destruction if another superpower directly attacks Russia.

The previous policies of appeasement that the Western world implemented in response to Russia's acts of aggression in 2008 and 2014 have only served to embolden Russia's aggressive behavior. Therefore, this piece of research aims to bridge this comprehension gap by investigating the role that Russian nationalism plays in the country's growing number of aggressive acts while Putin is in power. Moreover, my case study of Russia-Ukraine shows the similar use of nationalism and its rhetoric as a rallying cry to fight back against Russia. Rather than a nationalism based on ethnicity as Russia touts, Ukrainian's use of nationalistic rhetoric is rather civic nationalism that has more “inclusive criteria for membership in a nation, such as citizenship, common territory, multiculturalism, and internationalism” (Kasianenko 2020, 108). It is possible to observe the distaste for ethnic nationalism by Ukrainians in my case study due to the diminishing of Ukrainian national identity by Putin and the increasingly insidious rhetoric by Russian elites who use this type of nationalism to justify their war crimes against Ukraine.

In short, my research question will focus on this interconnectedness between national identities and nation-states and how nationalistic rhetoric and propaganda can heighten the nationalistic pride of citizens, especially during times of heightened nationalistic pride events such as the Olympics and national holidays, and analyze how this ideology is used to justify acts of aggression against foreign nations by authoritarian states. Additionally, I assert that in my case study Ukraine's Soviet legacy and relatively recent sovereignty factor into Russia's comfortability in attacking them, as the Russian government uses rhetoric such as reclaiming Ukraine and how Ukraine should've never been separated from Russian land to justify their claim to Ukraine's territory further. Ultimately, I wonder how Russian nationalism informs acts of Russian aggression, what role Russian Orthodoxy plays in supporting and legitimizing these acts of aggression, and how the Western world ought to respond to this.

The research question at the core of this study is: **To what extent does President Putin's nationalistic rhetoric, influenced by the Church-State dyad, justify and legitimize Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine?** This question holds paramount significance in the contemporary geopolitical landscape, as it delves into the nexus between state-sponsored nationalism, religious influence, and the justification of aggressive international behavior. Understanding the motivations behind Russia's actions in Ukraine is crucial for policymakers, scholars, and the international community alike. President Putin's adept use of nationalistic rhetoric, intertwined with religious undertones, has been instrumental in garnering domestic support for Russia's aggressive actions. Unraveling the complexities of this interplay is essential not only for comprehending Russia's current foreign policy but also for predicting and responding to future geopolitical developments. This question arises from the increasing importance of understanding the role of nationalism in shaping international relations, particularly when wielded by powerful state actors. Putin's ability to tap into historical, cultural,

and religious narratives to justify acts of aggression has broader implications for regional stability, sovereignty, and the global order. Thus, my research question aims to shed light on the mechanisms through which nationalism, guided by the Church-State relationship, functions as a legitimizing force for aggressive state behavior.

In exploring this question, the paper seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on Russian politics, international relations, and the dynamics between religion and the state. The findings are expected to offer insights into the ways in which nationalistic narratives are constructed, disseminated, and internalized by the Russian populace. Additionally, the study aims to uncover the implications of such narratives on the international stage, influencing perceptions of legitimacy and the global response to Russia's actions. This research question is timely, given the current state of international relations and the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. By addressing this question, the paper seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted factors contributing to Russia's aggressive posture and the role played by nationalism under the umbrella of the Church-State dyad.

This paper will investigate Russian nationalism under Putin's regime and its implications for Russian aggression against countries that have a former Soviet legacy. I aim to investigate whether the conception of nationalism and support from the Church bolsters support for Putin's authoritarian regime through the spreading of this rhetoric in news releases, state television, and religious sermons.

### **Literature Review:**

The Russian Federation continuously enacts numerous acts of aggression against foreign states, most notably over the past few years. To justify aggression against other countries, the Russian government and its religious and political elite have often appealed to nationalism (Breuilly, 2012). Similar to Laruelle (2018), I argue that Russian nationalism is not a monolithic ideology but comprises various strands, including imperial, ethnic, and Eurasianist perspectives. In the context of my study, I will focus on nationalism and its role as an instrument of the political elite in Russia. Similarly, I will hone in on how religion is also becoming a tool of the religious elite in the post-Soviet sphere (Brylov & Kalenychenko, 2020).

Russia's use of nationalism has justified its acts of aggression against its neighboring countries throughout its previous and current warmongering acts. The number of aggressive actions taken by Russia's elites has increased along with the use of nationalistic terminology to support these actions. Nationalistic discourse has been utilized by the Russian government and media to legitimize and excuse acts of aggression that threaten other countries' sovereignty (Rojek, 2022). During times of heightened nationalistic pride, like international sporting events or holidays, such propaganda has been especially prevalent, as seen most clearly during the Crimean Annexation on February 20, 2014, and for the current Russian-Ukrainian War that started on February 24, 2022. It is worth noting that both events were also during the Winter Olympics and lay between two national and highly celebrated holidays: Defender of the Fatherland Day (February 23) and International Women's Day (March 8).

Nationalism helps legitimize aggressive actions taken against neighboring countries, and Russian elites have utilized nationalism to this extent. Under Putin's rule, nationalism has been nurtured over the years to justify increasingly aggressive acts and to gain support for Putin, both venues of which have been successful. In contrast, the nationalistic rhetoric used to justify these aggressive acts is not immediately obvious to the typical Russian citizen. It is a gradual buildup of indoctrination, disinformation campaigns, and wounded nationalistic pride over numerous

years. When it comes to acts seen as safeguarding ethnic Russians and regaining traditional Russian land—nationalistic rhetoric used by the Russian government and media has been demonstrated to enhance public approval ratings. For instance, Nataliia Kasianenko's (2021) studies shed light on how foreign policy decisions in Russia and Ukraine have frequently been framed in terms of nationalist themes in presidential discourse. The study of nation-building and nationalism in Russia by Kolstø et al (2022) simultaneously demonstrates the same thing, showing how the Russian government has exploited nationalistic discourse in recent years to advance its aggressive foreign policy goals. Further, according to the Russian state and elite propaganda, Russians have a special cultural identity rooted in a long and storied past (Smith, 2021). This identity draws our attention back to the concept of national pride, such as winning World War II, being the first in space, doing well during international sporting events like the Olympics, and just being pioneers in the areas of the arts and sciences. Those who share the Russian language and culture have been pushed to the forefront in recent years as part of the "Russian World" (Harned, 2022) concept. Nationalistic rhetoric is frequently used by authoritarian nations like Russia to rationalize their aggressiveness toward other countries (Brookings, 2016).

In the past two decades, the world has witnessed increasing acts of Russian aggression that are justified by the Russian state through the use of nationalistic rhetoric to legitimize these acts both internally to Russia and toward Russian allies in Asia (Kolstø, 2016). In 2008, the first act of aggression against a former Soviet state occurred when Russia started the Russian-Georgian War (Rezvani, 2018). In 2008, post-Soviet cooperation started to decline between former Soviet states, and President Vladimir Putin tested the waters of Western response by attacking Georgia. The response from the West was negligible, they simply didn't care, and Russian international relations were barely affected (Kolstø, 2022).

Next, Russia attacked Ukraine and led the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014. This was an escalation from Russia's previous aggression and foreshadowed that claiming Ukrainian territory for Russia would be one of Putin's ultimate goals. This act of aggression showed Putin increasing how violent his colonialistic approach was and forcefully calling for the secession of Crimea. The main chastisement Russia faced was in the implementation of economic sanctions, most of which expired after a year (Alexseev, 2020). Then, there was Russia's latest act of aggression in 2022, the start of the current Russian-Ukrainian war. This current war is a battleground of existential nationalism, backed by religious fanaticism, and utilized in combination with calling upon the Soviet legacy and similar ethnicity of these countries being acted in order to legitimize and justify the aggression Russia is doing against foreign states. Russia argues that through these acts of aggression, it is ultimately regaining its previously owned lands and helping the ethnic Russians who reside on Ukrainian land. This is a fundamental justification put out by the Russian government and repeated often in Putin's speeches. Nationalistic rhetoric, which portrays Russia as a strong and rising nation with a manifest destiny to defend and advance the interests of Russian-speaking peoples everywhere, provides the gasoline for this fabricated story of making Russia and, consequently, Putin seem heroic towards those in the Russian World. The Russian government and the religious and political elite consistently frame these overly aggressive measures as necessary to protect ethnic Russians and the Russian World from the dangers of the outside world.

Kasianenko (2021) and Kolstø et al (2022) further illustrate how Putin has been a major proponent of this nationalist discourse and utilizes it to strengthen his position at home and expand his influence abroad. Putin's brand of nationalism is characterized by a commitment to a

robust central government, a focus on traditional values, and a contempt for Western liberalism and democracy. Many people in Russia, especially those who view themselves as proud and patriotic Russians, have felt humiliated on the global stage by the West since the fall of the Soviet Union and have thus found solace in this idealized story that Putin puts on (Hughes, 2013). Further, there was a spike in the frequency of speeches given by Russian political and religious elites with nationalist themes in the months leading up to and following the start of the 2014 Crimean takeover and the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian war (Tuminez, 2019). The Russian government's popularity has increased alongside its employment of nationalistic rhetoric. As evaluated by groups like the Levada Center (2022), approval ratings supporting Putin and his religious and political elite typically went up after these lectures. In contrast, the Levada Center shows that in times when there was no war occurring. Hence, nationalistic rhetoric wasn't as prominent, and over 25% of those surveyed believed Russia was on the wrong track (Levada, 2022).

In sum, every one of Russia's recent acts of aggression uses political rhetoric rooted in nationalism to justify these occurrences, and religious elites in society further support them amongst devout citizens who are otherwise uninterested in politics. Nationalism was used to justify the imperialist policies of Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia. These aggressive expansionist policies aim to further the reach of Putin's Russian empire. In this paper, I will do a case study examining how nationalistic rhetoric from political elites and the Russian Orthodox Church legitimizes and justifies Russian acts of aggression against the Ukrainian state. The current war is a battleground of existential nationalism that has been steadily built up over the past few years and lends credence to Russia's pursuit of Ukraine; this is why Ukraine is fighting back as hard as possible. Otherwise, there will be no Ukraine if they lose this war. Nationalism is a bedrock to legitimize this conflict and the previous ones. The Russian Orthodox Church has contributed to spreading nationalist discourse, backing Russia's aggressive policies in Ukraine, and effectively making Ukraine a religious battleground in this war (Åtland, 2021; Houston & Mandaville, 2022). Promoting the idea of a Russian World and framing the crisis in Ukraine as a war between Orthodox and Catholic or Protestant beliefs are two examples of how the Church has contributed to the escalation of tensions in the region to delineate further an in-group vs out-group dynamic between those of the Russian World and those not (Shakrai, 2015). As a result, Russian people generally view Russian aggression as more acceptable since it's only to 'protect' those of the Russian world.

Putin's employment of patriotic rhetoric has greatly helped legitimize Russia's military interventions and bolster national pride and solidarity in Russia. The Levada Center found that while nationalistic discourse was at its highest, support for Putin's actions in Ukraine and Syria rose sharply (Focus-Allegati, 2022; Kasianenko, 2021). Russia's aggression towards foreign sovereign states has been further legitimized due to the support of the Russian Orthodox Church for the government's nationalist agenda (Flanagan et al., 2019). The Church has succeeded in bolstering nationalist discourse and gaining popular support for its measures by portraying the conflict as a religious struggle and how any Russians dying in Ukraine to support the war "Washes away all sins" they have committed (RFE/RL, 2022). However, the opinions of the majority of the Russian population are not necessarily shared by the Russian Orthodox Church in its support of the Russian government's nationalist agenda. Nevertheless, many people still blindly believe in and support the Church (Pifer, 2015).

To effectively justify and legitimate their hostile acts towards foreign sovereign states, the Russian government and media have ruthlessly exploited the use of nationalistic rhetoric



(Maiorova, 2010). Support for the government's nationalist goal and the justification of its harsh measures have also been greatly aided by the Russian Orthodox Church and the meticulous timing of these attacks during periods of heightened nationalistic pride. In sum, Russia's political and religious elite utilize nationalistic rhetoric to publicly further the cause of supporting a strong and global Russian state that simply looks out for the best interests of Russian speakers domestically and internationally (Kolstø, 2016). Russia's aggressive policies toward its neighbors, especially those with a Soviet legacy, are often justified by appeals to nationalism and reminiscing about the time before those countries' sovereignty when they were under Soviet rule.

Ultimately, when trying to figure out what drives Russian aggressiveness towards foreign nations and how to best cooperate with Russia in the future as a fellow world super-power, it is essential to grasp the significance of nationalism in Russian politics. Especially in a post-Putin timeframe, foreign nations need to be able to understand the compromises and complexities of the current Russian nationalist identity and how this identity can be used to legitimize and justify Russian acts of aggression (Estrada & Koutronas, 2022). This case study will examine how Russia's political and religious elite have utilized aggressive attacks on other sovereign entities with a history of Soviet legacy, using rhetoric that appeals to Russian nationalism and is supported by Russian religiosity and the public approval of the Russian Church (Surzhko-Harned, 2022).

### Theory:

This research is guided by a comprehensive theory that seeks to explain the relationship between Russian nationalism, as shaped simultaneously by Russian political elites and by the Russian Orthodox Church, and the legitimization of aggressive actions against neighboring countries, particularly those with a Soviet legacy. The theory posits that the combination of state-sponsored nationalism and religious endorsement serves as a powerful tool for the Russian government in justifying and garnering support for acts of aggression. The theory consists of an independent variable (Russian nationalism) and a dependent variable (aggressive state behavior), with a causal mechanism linking the two.

My independent variable is Russian nationalism. In the context of this paper, Russian nationalism is further defined based on the insights provided by D. Brylov and T. Kalenychenko's work, *Religion and Nationalism in Post-Soviet Space* (2020). These authors identify a form of nationalism in Russia termed 'imperial nationalism,' which is encapsulated by the 'Russian World' conception within the Russian Orthodox Church. This imperial type of nationalism is inclusive of a commitment to Russian culture, Orthodox Christianity, and a sense of solidarity with the destiny of the Russian people. This identity is deeply rooted in the preservation of linguistic and religious traditions. Presently, it may also include adherence to traditional values and contempt for Western liberalism and democracy. This nationalism typology employs a narrow view of membership based on ethnicity, shared culture, religion, and historical ties. The principle of ethnic Russian domination is also a notable aspect of this concept, implying a hierarchy within the nation where ethnic Russians hold a central role in defining and preserving the national identity. This principle shapes the perception of who belongs to the nation and holds a prominent position within it.

Another distinctive feature of this concept is the imperial guardian character of this vein of nationalism, positing the nation a role as a protector and preserver of a broader imperial space. This extends beyond the borders of contemporary Russia and includes a vision of safeguarding Russian culture and Orthodoxy globally. This ties in nicely with the nationalism propagated

under Putin's regime, which allegedly aims to defend and advance the interests of ethnic Russians both within and outside Russia. This form of nationalism becomes a potent tool for the government to foster national pride, rally public support, and justify aggressive actions against neighboring states. Lastly, the 'Declaration of Russian Identity' (ibid.) plays a significant role in shaping this form of nationalism as this is a document that defines Russian identity based on language, Orthodoxy, and solidarity with the Russian people. It serves as a foundational aspect, influencing the narrative of what it means to be Russian.

My causal mechanism is the legitimization of Russian acts of military aggression through the use of nationalistic rhetoric. The theory asserts that the Russian government, under Putin's leadership, strategically deploys nationalistic rhetoric to legitimize and excuse acts of aggression against neighboring countries. Nationalistic discourse is utilized to frame foreign policy decisions, particularly during times of heightened nationalistic pride, such as international sporting events or holidays. This propaganda becomes especially prevalent during significant geopolitical events, like the Crimean Annexation in 2014 and the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian War. The gradual buildup of nationalistic indoctrination, disinformation campaigns, and pride over numerous years contributes to the public's acceptance and approval of aggressive measures taken by the Russian government. Nationalism further serves to enhance public approval ratings, as observed by the increase in support for Putin and his religious and political elite during times of nationalistic discourse, as reported by the Levada Center (2022).

The Russian Orthodox Church plays an important part in the adoption of nationalistic discourse. Tuminez (2019) highlights how the Church has been vocal and very activist in its support of the rights of Russian speakers and Russian ethnics in Ukraine. The Church has also been splintered in Ukraine after the 2014 Crimean Annexation. As of 2018, an independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine was founded (Houston & Mandaville, 2022) without the Moscow Church's support. The new Church supports the Ukrainian government's nationalist goal, as demonstrated by Lena Harned's research on religious narratives in Ukraine's anti-colonial nationalism (2022). Nationalistic discourse has been just as important as the function of the Orthodox Church in legitimizing Russian acts of aggression towards neighboring states. There is no one succinct definition of nationalism. Still, it can be summarized as "a commitment to the primacy of one's own nation and an enthusiasm for advocating for its interests and values" (Kolstø et al., 2022). A strong and expanding Russian state has long been associated with Russian nationalism, which has traditionally sought to defend and advance the interests of ethnic Russians both inside and outside of Russia (Heller, 2014). Nationalism is essentially a good thing for ethnic Russians everywhere.

Russian political and religious elite have used aggressive attacks by the Russian state on foreign sovereign states with a history of Soviet Legacy to justify and legitimize nationalistic rhetoric during times of heightened national pride, such as the 2014 Crimean annexation and the current Russian-Ukrainian war (Tuminez, 2019). In times of crisis or conflict, the employment of nationalistic discourse has been found to enhance public approval ratings for the actions of the Russian government (Kasianenko, 2021). There is a rally around the flag ideology as well, suggesting that during the conflict, levels of mass nationalism and public approval of state leaders increase dramatically. All of this contributes to Putin's heightened support for his expansionist acts.

My dependent variable is, therefore, aggressive state behavior which refers to Russia's actions against neighboring countries, specifically those with a Soviet legacy, including the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing war with Ukraine. The theory contends that

nationalistic rhetoric is instrumental in justifying and legitimizing these acts, portraying them as endeavors to reclaim former Soviet lands and protect ethnic Russians abroad. This aggressive behavior, justified through nationalistic narratives, serves to strengthen Putin's domestic position and expand Russia's influence abroad.

My theory also extends to incorporate the role of the Russian Orthodox Church as an influential factor in shaping and endorsing nationalist discourse. The Church's support for Russian nationalism is rooted in an anti-colonial nationalist ideology, viewing Ukraine as an integral part of Russia's historical and cultural past. There is a historical geographical and religious precedent for the Russian Orthodox Church and, consequently, the Russian government to be in that sphere and try to claim Ukraine as one of their own. The Church's backing of state expansionist policies, especially during conflicts involving Orthodox populations like the current war in Ukraine, is framed as fulfilling God's will to protect the Russian World. It can be tied back to the traditional imagining of Ukraine being something akin to a sacred land and that there was a golden age of religiosity that the nation is trying to reclaim (Smith, 2004). Consequently, the Russian Orthodox Church's influence is crucial in garnering domestic support for the government's nationalist agenda.

The Russian Orthodox Church, while noted to have limited influence on political decisions, contributes significantly to the ideological underpinnings of Russian imperial nationalism. It serves as a unifying force, reinforcing the connection between Russian culture, Orthodoxy, and the nation. Moreover, its endorsement of state actions, such as the annexation of Crimea, contributes to public approval, as the Church is seen as a symbol of national and personal identity. Despite internal divisions within the Church and allegations of corruption (Surzhko-Harned, 2022) its support for the government's nationalist goals remains pivotal in justifying Russia's aggressive policies. In summary, Russian nationalism, as articulated in the concept of imperial nationalism, is characterized by essentialist principles, an imperial guardian character, the principle of ethnic Russian domination, and a close association with the Russian Orthodox Church. It reflects a vision of preserving and expanding Russian cultural and religious influence globally, with the Church serving as a key actor in shaping and reinforcing this national identity.

In conclusion, my theory posits that Russian nationalism, fueled by nationalistic rhetoric and endorsed by the Russian Orthodox Church, plays a central role in legitimizing and justifying aggressive state behavior. The interplay between nationalism and religious influence forms a powerful tool for the Russian government, shaping public perceptions, garnering support, and facilitating a narrative of defending the Russian World. Understanding this theoretical framework is essential for comprehending the roots of Russian aggressiveness and planning for interactions with Russia in a post-Putin era, where the Church is likely to maintain significant influence.

### **Hypotheses:**

*H1: If President Putin employs nationalistic rhetoric supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, then there will be an increased acceptance and justification among the Russian populace for aggressive actions against Ukraine.*

My first hypothesis suggests that as President Putin utilizes nationalistic rhetoric shaped alongside support by the Russian Orthodox Church, there will be a rise in the level of acceptance and justification among the Russian population for aggressive actions against Ukraine. In essence, the hypothesis posits that the interplay between religious and political elements in Putin's rhetoric will contribute to a greater endorsement of aggressive state behavior by the



Russian populace.

*H2: If the combination of Russian nationalism, propagated by President Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church, is increasingly utilized in media and state channels, then there will be a heightened sense of nationalistic pride among the Russian population.*

My second hypothesis suggests that as Russian nationalism, promoted by President Putin and his political elites and the Russian Orthodox Church, becomes more prevalent in media and state channels, there will be an escalation in nationalistic pride among the Russian population. In simpler terms, the hypothesis proposes that increased exposure to nationalist narratives in official communication channels will lead to a stronger sense of pride and identification with Russian nationalism among the public.

*H3: If there is a continuous intertwining of historical, cultural, and religious narratives by the government and the Church, then the narrative justifying aggressive state behavior will remain consistent and potent.*

My third hypothesis posits that if the Russian government and the Orthodox Church consistently weave together historical, cultural, and religious narratives, the narrative used to justify aggressive state behavior will remain strong and consistent over time. In other words, the hypothesis suggests that the continuous integration of these elements into the narrative will contribute to its lasting potency, influencing public perception and sustaining the justification for aggressive actions against other nations.

The hypotheses will be analyzed through a case study of Russia's military aggression over the past two decades, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitatively, I will use the Levada Center's public opinion data to assess variations in public trust and approval ratings during periods of heightened nationalistic rhetoric and geopolitical events. Qualitatively, MAXQDA software will aid in the analysis of Putin's speeches through schema analysis, focusing on themes related to nationalistic rhetoric. This includes identifying cognitive structures and mental frameworks constructed by Putin's nationalist discourse. The analysis will integrate quantitative and qualitative findings, providing a nuanced understanding of the relationships between nationalistic rhetoric, public opinion, and aggressive state behavior in Russia. Existing data from the Levada Center will complement the analysis, enhancing the research's overall contribution to understanding the dynamics of Russian politics under Putin's leadership.

## **Methods:**

Alongside my qualitative case study of Russia and its acts of military aggression over the past two decades, my methodology will also incorporate qualitative text analysis through MAXQDA. A purposive sampling approach will be used, targeting a diverse range of Putin's speeches delivered over the past two decades, it is key to select speeches that are representative of different periods, contexts, and policy initiatives. It is important to choose speeches where nationalistic rhetoric is expected to be prominent, as well as speeches where it may be less explicit but still potentially influential so as to reduce or mitigate any selection and confirmation biases in my research. The selected speeches will be transcribed, if not already, particularly concerning speeches related to significant political events, such as the annexation of Crimea and the current war in Ukraine. This selection will be sourced from official government websites, news agencies, and reputable academic repositories. The speeches will be organized

chronologically to create a comprehensive dataset. Each speech will be thoroughly reviewed in Russian and English to ensure an accurate representation of the meaning of Putin's words.

I will use schema analysis to identify and categorize themes related to nationalistic rhetoric in Putin's speeches. Themes might include references to national pride, sovereignty, or appeals to a shared cultural or ethnic identity. A codebook will be developed to define and describe different aspects of nationalistic rhetoric. This codebook will guide the systematic coding of speech excerpts related to the identified themes I will discover. Comparisons will also be made within and across speeches to analyze how the use of nationalistic rhetoric evolves over time and in response to different policy contexts.

Schema analysis will also be used to examine the cognitive structures and mental frameworks that may be constructed or reinforced by Putin's nationalist rhetoric. This will involve identifying recurring schemas, repeated words, or phrases used to invoke nationalistic rhetoric related to nationalism and assessing their influence on public perception and policy support (to assess the actual influence of these speeches, there would need to be a quantitative aspect brought into this research, involving the Levada Center monthly public opinion data). A stoplist would also be crucial to filter out irrelevant terms and focus on the ones that matter. Moreover, a content dictionary will be created for terms related to nationalistic rhetoric, this would help in systematically identifying and coding passages within Putin's speeches that contain nationalistic language. It also ensures consistency in coding and analysis across different speeches. Semantic network analysis could also be applied to understand how nationalistic terms are interconnected in Putin's speeches. For example, it could reveal whether certain nationalistic themes tend to co-occur or form clusters within his discourse.

I will also inform my research by using previously existing data from public approval and trust ratings through the Levada Center. I utilize information from text analysis and qualitative content analysis that I will conduct through MAXQDA. I will focus on the contents and volume of Putin's speeches immediately after and following the years in which Russia's aggressive acts unfolded.

There are also several major content categories that were covered in this Goudimiak data set, the first major category, Helping Ukrainian/Brother nation/Illegitimate coup, utilizes terminology of helping the Russian World and protecting the brother-state of Ukraine. In essence, disregarding Ukraine's national sovereignty and strong-arming them into being forceful participants of the Russian World was what Putin was getting at in these pieces of the pie chart. The second most popular category, Projecting blame/Lack of dialogue, highlights Putin blaming the West for funding the crisis in Ukraine, for pushing for Russian isolation policies, and for stationing large volumes of its military on foreign borders. Common terms in these speeches included "U.S. supported the coup," the comparison of Russian troops to U.S. troops, "Russia is open for dialogue," and "Ukraine must lead negotiations" (Goudimiak, 2014, p.27). In general, this trend serves to highlight that when Putin isn't embracing the role of savior of the Russian World, he is blaming the West for all of the problems in the post-Soviet sphere. This further shows the validity of my compilation and analysis of Putin's speeches.

Preliminary calculations I have conducted thus far, using the Goudimiak data, cover the time period during the five months before the 2014 Crimean Annexation, the two months during it, and the five months succeeding it are shown below. In Figure 1 below, I use the data gathered by Goudimiak to highlight the contents and volume of Putin's speeches. In total, 57 speeches, excerpts, and interviews were analyzed that Putin did. Moreover, some speeches mentioned multiple topics shown in Figure 1 below; 32 speeches mentioned the idea of helping the Russian

World and the ethnic Russians in Ukraine, 31 speeches projected blame onto entities like the West, for instance, and framed these aggressive acts as something Putin was forced to do, 22 speeches mentioned historical memories and the will of the people, 21 speeches directly mentioned protecting Russian interests abroad, and 18 speeches denied that there was any

**Figure 1: Putin's Speech Frequencies Amid the Ukraine Crisis in 2014**



intention to be involved in the Crimean Annexation. Rather speeches in this category used terminology such as “peace for Ukraine” and “no armed forces” (Goudimiak, 2014, p. 29-30).

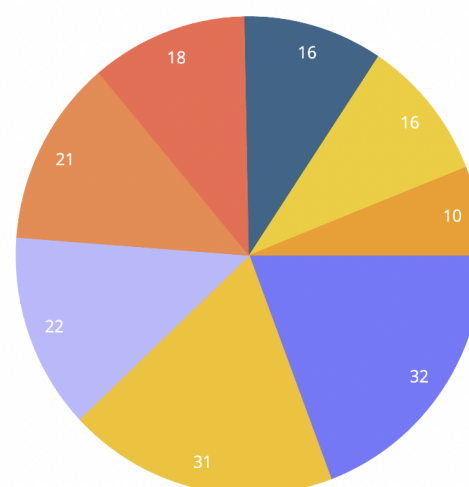
I craft Figure 2 below to give a better breakdown of the most common categories of the eight that the data set covers. In the first major category, Helping Ukrainian/Brother

nation/Illegitimate coup, I find that the terminology of helping the Russian World and protecting the brother-state of Ukraine was used most in these speeches. In essence, disregarding Ukraine's sovereignty and strong-arming them into being forceful participants of the Russian World was what Putin was getting at in these pieces of the pie chart.

The second most popular category, Projecting blame/Lack of dialogue, is also 19% of the total speeches in this analysis. In this category, Putin is blaming the West for funding the crisis in Ukraine, for pushing for Russian isolation policies, and for stationing large volumes of its military on foreign borders. Common terms in these speeches included “U.S. supported the coup,” the comparison of Russian troops to U.S. troops, “Russia is open for dialogue,” and “Ukraine must lead negotiations”(Goudimiak, 2014, p.27). In general, this trend serves to highlight that when Putin isn't embracing the role of savior of the Russian World, he is blaming the West for all of the problems in the post-Soviet sphere. To support this data gathered by Goudimiak, I will also illustrate some of the data collected from Kasianenko's text analysis during this same time period. In Figure 3,

below, you can see the analysis of the volume of the speeches studied, which included of 859 references to the nation before the conflict (from September 1, 2013 - February 28, 2014) and 863 references to the nation during the conflict (from March 1, 2014 - August 31, 2014). Figure 3 shows that there is a highly increased amount of references to political issues when discussing nationalism in the time period of conflict.

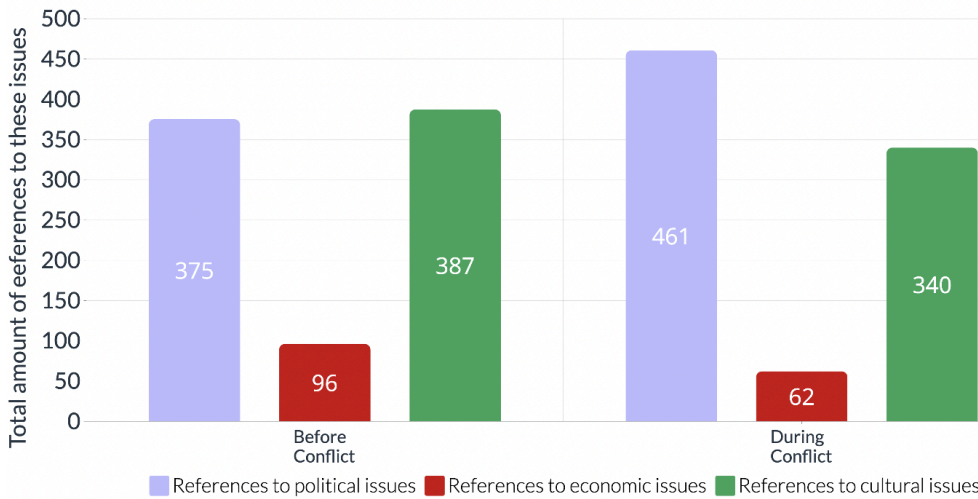
**Figure 2: Putin's Speech Breakdown Amid the Ukraine Crisis in 2014 & Its Aftermath**



In contrast, reference to economic or cultural issues when using nationalistic rhetoric decreased during this time period. These findings support my hypothesis that there is a correlation between increased nationalistic rhetoric utilized by Russia before conflicts and during them.

The Goudimiak data gathered regarding Putin's speeches and the use of nationalistic rhetoric, especially in the context

**Figure 3: Analyzing Before and After Conflict Speech Allusions, 2013-2014**



of the annexation of Crimea, supports my first hypothesis. The emphasis on helping the Russian world and protecting ethnic Russians in Ukraine, as well as the framing of aggressive acts as necessary, indicates an attempt to garner support through nationalist narratives. Furthermore, the Kasianenko data I have regarding the prevalence of nationalistic themes in Putin's speeches and their impact on public opinion, as measured by the Levada Center's public approval and trust ratings,

supports my second hypothesis as well. The increased volume of speeches discussing nationalism during times of conflict suggests a deliberate effort to cultivate nationalistic sentiments. Lastly, the consistent use of nationalistic rhetoric across different events, as illustrated by the breakdown of speech categories, indicates an ongoing integration of historical, cultural, and religious narratives. This aligns in support of my third hypothesis, suggesting that the narrative justifying aggressive state behavior remains consistent and potent. Nevertheless, I cannot control for confounding factors that may have influenced the use of nationalistic rhetoric by Putin and his allies during this period. However, I can justify that an exogenous shock, such as starting a war, would be one catalyst towards increased nationalistic rhetoric to justify and legitimize these attacks. To conclude, these preliminary findings appear to support my hypothesis with regard to the Crimean Annexation, but a more comprehensive analysis combining qualitative and quantitative approaches will be conducted further to provide a more robust understanding of the dynamics between nationalistic rhetoric, public opinion, and state behavior in Russia under Putin's leadership.

The data analysis I will continue to conduct will cover the current Russia-Ukrainian War and is expected to contribute significantly to the academic literature by shedding light on the relationship between Putin's nationalist rhetoric, the relationship of the Russian Orthodox Church to his consolidation of Russian nationalism in the Russkiy Mir, and its impact on public opinion and policy support. By using classical content analysis and schema analysis, I will not only identify the prevalence of nationalist themes in his speeches but also explore how these themes shape the cognitive frameworks of the audience. This research will provide valuable insights into the mechanisms through which political leaders can use nationalist rhetoric to influence public sentiment and garner support for their policies, particularly in the context of Russia under Putin's leadership. Understanding this dynamic is essential in comprehending the enduring appeal of Putin's leadership and the broader landscape of Russian politics.

In conclusion, this research seeks to unravel the intricate interplay between Putin's nationalist rhetoric in his speeches and its influence on his public perception and policy support in Russia. By employing rigorous qualitative data analysis techniques, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of nationalism in shaping political discourse, public sentiment, and legitimizing military aggression in the contemporary Russian sphere. This research, if my theory proves sound, can also be extrapolated towards measuring the rhetoric of other authoritarian leaders and how they utilize it in unison with religious elites backing to change public opinion attitudes toward their own policy objectives.

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