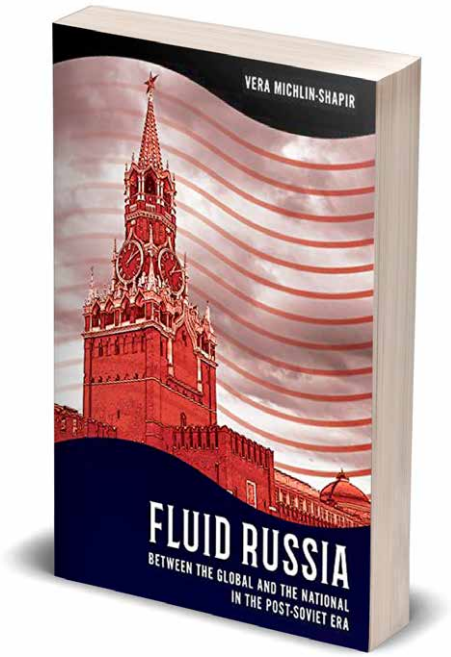

What is Fluid in Russian Identity?

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Fluid Russia: Between the Global and the National in the Post-Soviet Era
by Vera Michlin-Shapir
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On December 30, 1999, an article titled "Russia on the Brink of the Millennium" was published, written by Vladimir Putin, who at the time was the Prime Minister of Russia. In the article, Putin analyzed the challenges facing Russia, which suffered from political, economic, and social shockwaves following the breakup of the Soviet Union, and presented his vision for the coming years. Putin considered the primary imperative the unification of society based on a new "Russian idea," whose most prominent principles are patriotism, superpower-ness (*derzhavnost*), and the strength of the state (*gosudarstvennichestvo*). Putin proposed combining these traditional components of the "Russian idea" with universal values such as individual freedoms, but also questioned whether the Western liberal model would ever be able to strike roots in Russia (Putin, 1999).

The day after its publication, President Boris Yeltsin resigned unexpectedly and declared that he saw Putin as his successor; by virtue of the constitution, Putin that day became the acting President. In effect, the article proved to be a ploy intended to prepare in advance a platform of sorts of the new President's positions, as he was previously considered an unfamiliar technocrat. In retrospect, after 22 years of Putin's rule and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, examination of the article reveals that building the new Russian identity is a lifelong enterprise for Putin, and without addressing it, it is difficult to understand his motivations and courses of action in foreign policy. How is it possible that the Ukrainian nation is described by Putin as an inseparable part of the Russian nation, and at the same time as "an infant taken captive" by neo-Nazis?

Dr. Vera Michlin-Shapir's book *Fluid Russia*, published in late 2021, before the 2022 war, attempts to address questions of this sort. The book is based on Michlin-Shapir's doctoral dissertation, which was written in the middle of the previous decade at Tel Aviv University under the guidance of Dr. Vera Kaplan and Prof. Iris Rachamimov. The background to the study is Michlin-Shapir's discomfort with the accepted explanations about the national identity crisis in Russia in the post-Soviet era and the Russian elite's compulsive efforts to define it.

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characterizes other societies worldwide, but is also marked by unique characteristics of Russian history and culture. Thus Michlin-Shapir distinguishes herself from most researchers, who seek to explain the ambiguity of Russian national identity or the negative anti-Western element in it by severing the historical sequence following the breakup of the Soviet Union. For them it is a kind of "post-imperial syndrome," a response to national humiliation and to the economic difficulty felt by the Russians following the weakening of their country, similar to the national humiliation felt by the Germans after their defeat in World War I, which led to the growth of Nazism (pp. 2-4).

The book presents an alternative analytical paradigm for understanding the growth of Russian national identity in the post-Soviet era, which Michlin-Shapir calls "fluid Russia." Through it, the author seeks to understand the processes that led to Putin's rise to power. She sees Putin as the face of the generation—the leader who can blossom under conditions of globalization and innovation of the modern digital media, identify the Russian nation's longing to restore national pride and stability, and provide it with an answer.

The author proposes seeing the upheaval that struck Russian identity following the breakup of the Soviet Union as one example of a universal phenomenon that characterizes "late modernity" (the contemporary period). This is a meeting of traditional identity—Soviet identity, in the case of Russia—with the challenges of globalization and the new digital media environment. Globalization floods Russia from the outside and evokes a desire to enjoy its fruits at the same time that it evokes opposition to change. The media environment is both the arena where globalization influences Russia and is the source of the tools used by its leadership to address the challenge (pp. 7-10).

The book contends that as part of "late modernity" and under the influence of globalization, institutions and identities suffer fragmentation, and thus "national identity" as a broad and solid foundation erodes in favor of the "identification" of the individual, who gathers ideas to believe in and decides which faith-ideological customs to adopt. The erosion of social and national unity evokes a longing for "inclusive ideas" to restore the sense of "togetherness," but also enable the variety of identities to coexist. In order to define his belonging, the individual can eclectically choose ideas and practices that are comfortable for him and ignore inherent contradictions. This leads to the blurring of deep internal contrasts within the collective identity, which can flare up subsequently. Michlin-Shapir proposes calling the phenomenon of basing Russian national identity on inclusive ideas that emphasize the shared history, the Russian language, members of different religions and different ethnic groups living together, conservative family values, superpower-ness, and a strong state by the name "fluid Russianness" (pp. 10-12).

The book has seven chapters. The introductory chapter presents the theoretical framework for understanding "fluid Russianness." Following are three topical sections (citizenship policy, the media discourse on national identification, and practices that stem from the Russian holiday calendar) that demonstrate Russia's "fluidity" from three perspectives—the state, the media environment, and the general public. Each of the three sections comprises two chapters: a chapter that reviews the period of Yeltsin's rule (1992-1999) and a chapter that discusses the period of Putin's rule (beginning in the year 2000).

In the first section, which discusses changes in the legal definitions regarding citizenship in the Russian federation, Michlin-Shapir points out the duality: on the one hand, starting in the 1990s, what stood out was the attempt to define Russia as the homeland of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers. On the other hand, given the many non-Russian ethnic groups in the Russian federation, the government became more apprehensive about determining that belonging to the Russian nation would become a criterion

for eligibility for citizenship and receiving civil rights. Meanwhile, the desire to adapt Russia's society and economy to the modern needs of freedom of movement, immigration, and emigration encountered concerns on the part of the Russian public regarding the entry of foreigners who are not ethnic Russians, especially with regard to Russian-speaking Muslims from the post-Soviet space, as well as bureaucratic inertia, which placed barriers to immigration and naturalization (pp. 15-64).

The second section discusses the media discourse in Russia on identity and formation of a new national idea. The decade of the 1990s is viewed negatively in Russian historiography due to the many difficulties that arose: the weakening of Russia's international power; an economic crisis; social hardships; and a general sense of disorientation. Yeltsin's generation tried to distinguish the new Russia from the Soviet past, grappled with the positive content that could be included in the new national idea, and insisted that the state no longer try to promote a global ideology as in the communist period (pp. 78-83).

Under Putin, an elaborate propaganda mechanism took shape for advancing identity-building narrative at the national level, while obscuring or skewing the meaning of concepts. The Putinist propaganda mechanism helped impart messages that are convenient for the regime by blurring the contradictions, but also buried explosive charges with a suspended mechanism of operation. Michlin-Shapir puts the spotlight on the television medium, which was (and still is) essential for instilling the regime's narratives in the Russian public, and in her view, helps package the militarism of the Putin regime with an attractive layer of pop culture (pp. 99-104).

The fear of defining Russia as the nation of the Russians was already clear among the Russian elite during the Yeltsin era, lest it bring about the alienation of the extensive non-Russian ethnic groups. The inclusive term "patriotism" began enjoying a positive connotation in Moscow while ultra-nationalism was cast as negative, and thus the effort to realize national aspirations in the framework of the post-Soviet republics was gradually targeted for attack by Russia (pp. 83; 105-111).

For the new states, their giant neighbor's intervention in favor of ethnic Russians was seen as the activity of a "fifth column" and an undermining of their right to exist. Governments that did not cooperate with Moscow were labeled as "nationalistic"—a term that more recently evolved into accusations of "Nazism" among the Ukrainians. The Putin regime cultivates Russianness but rejects the legitimacy of cultivating Ukrainian-ness and Belarussian-ness, presenting them as nationalistic, semi-Nazi, movements. Ostensibly, Putin continues to adopt the "brotherhood of nations" approach from the Soviet period, but in practice has exhibited much tolerance for the strengthening of extreme right wing nationalistic movements in Russia and even makes use of them (pp. 115-119), including in the current war in Ukraine.

In contrast with Yeltsin, who tried to disconnect from the Soviet chapter of Russian history, Putin has striven to restore historical continuity and formulated a selective historical narrative that glorifies the achievements of Russian civilization, in which special emphasis is placed on the heroic episode of defeating Nazi Germany. The enormous sacrifice of the Soviet nation and the victory help define modern Russia as "the nation of victors" in a way that makes it easier for the public to identify with it, while the dark chapters that led to the war, such as Stalin's collaboration with Hitler or the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) are ignored, and reference to them is seen as undermining "the national truth" (pp. 155-161). This historical narrative had a key role in justifying the current Russian attack in Ukraine and denying the legitimacy of Ukraine's existence as a separate entity from Russia.

Throughout the years of Putin's rule, the struggle against the external enemy that seeks to harm Russia is a central narrative that helps

garner public support for Putin. The wars in Chechnya (pp. 88-89), Georgia (p. 159), Crimea, and Syria and the media coverage surrounding them aim to rally the public around the flag and strengthen its support for Putin. Putin promotes the value of stability that the public so desires after the "wild 1990s," but his interpretation of stability is the justification of authoritarianism and the restriction of individual freedoms.

In Michlin-Shapir's view, these examples illustrate how the Putin regime has succeeded in combining increasing authoritative elements with an image of Russia as having a unique democratic tradition; building a militaristic society that is aggressive in its foreign policy while warning its citizens of the "Russo-phobic West" that is striving to dismantle Russia from the inside; and benefiting economically from globalization while pursuing seclusion and self-reliance.

Fluid Russia presents a convincing explanation of the connection between the aggressive foreign policy of the Putin regime and its efforts to maintain its hold on the domestic arena.

The book's third section discusses changes in the Russian national holiday calendar. During the Yeltsin era, the calendar attempted to create new dates that would differentiate it from the Soviet heritage and integrate the secular calendar with religious holidays. Under Putin, the holiday calendar underwent militarization: Victory Day over Nazi Germany (May 9) became the most important and sacred holiday and was surrounded with symbols and traditions that in the eyes of Michlin-Shapir strengthen the militarism of Russian society. Thus, wearing the symbol of the ribbon of Saint George, which was invented by the Russian news agency as the hallmark of commemoration of Victory Day, evolved into a practice whose meaning is public affirmation of belonging to the Russian nation—the "nation of victors"—while the refusal to wear it (even among those who observe Victory Day) is deemed a Russo-phobic measure that undermines the historical truth.

The manipulative use of media technologies to instill signs of belonging via graphic symbols also characterizes the war in Ukraine. The symbols of V and Z (markings of Russian military units that invaded Ukraine) were marketed to the Russian public as symbols that reflect support for the Russian army, and they have a prominent presence in the Russian public sphere that is promoted by the Putin regime.

Inserting the Orthodox holidays in the national calendar corresponds with the conservative values that the Putin regime seeks to promote as an element of national identity. Orthodoxy helps the Putin regime claim that democracy is foreign to Russia (pp. 165-170). The church also contributes to the militarization of society through deep penetration of the military, as illustrated by Dima Adamsky in his recent book *The Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy* (2019).

Michlin-Shapir concludes that despite the many efforts to build a new Russian national identity, the range of ideas that the Putin regime offers to Russia's citizens do not form a cohesive corpus of ideas, and it remains superficial and fraught with internal contradictions. The Putin regime has created illusory stability, and its propaganda mechanism helps citizens suppress reality (pp. 119-123; 174-176). The young person "with Putin on his shirt and an iPhone in his pocket" serves, according to Michlin-Shapir, as an example of such contradictions: he wants to be both a conservative patriot and to enjoy the pleasures of freedom and globalism.

Fluid Russia presents a convincing explanation of the connection between the aggressive foreign policy of the Putin regime and its efforts to maintain its hold on the domestic arena. Analyzing the narratives that Putin has woven over the years and the media mechanisms that serve his regime helps to better understand Putin's thinking on the invasion of Ukraine, his conduct during the war, and in particular the firm and (to Western audiences) unlikely support that Putin has received from

the Russian public. While due to incomplete understanding of his conceptions on identity many failed to predict Putin's actions leading up to the invasion, the book illustrates that in the discipline of international relations, it is essential to take into consideration the field of identity.

The model of the "fluidity" of identities in "late modernity" explains not only the gradual radicalization of Russia but also the growing strength of the right and left in Europe and the political polarization in the United States that led to the rise of President Trump, against the backdrop of increasing economic and social hardships that stem from globalization and are enhanced by the new media environment (p. 123). In this sense, Michlin-Shapir's model also offers an analytical foundation for studying the political polarization and radicalization of the discourse in Israel in recent years. While the book does not purport to offer solutions, a more accurate diagnosis and description of the mechanisms of the problem's emergence are already a step toward remedying the difficulties.

The term "fluid Russia" is counter-intuitive in relation to a country whose aggressive foreign and domestic policy is its hallmark. The book proves this well, but also does not rule out the possibility that the future seclusion of Russia regarding the trends of globalization or a major crisis could bring about changes in "the trends of fluidity." How will that young person "with Putin on his shirt" change when his iPhone is taken away (a scenario occurring before our eyes)? The Putin regime's attempt in recent years, and all the more so since the beginning of the war, to close any channel of opposition communication and thinking could lead Russian national identity to be more consolidated and less "fluid" in the coming years, such that the individual is left with more limited room to decide what to believe in, and an orderly and mandatory faith-ideological foundation is imposed on him from above. Indeed, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, we can identify ideologization efforts in education and in other areas of life.

Michlin-Shapir's book requires readers to engage in rigorous analytical thought. It is based on many theories from various disciplines (history, international relations, sociology, social psychology, and media) that are intertwined and analyzed in a very orderly manner. Readers who make an effort will better understand not only Putin's Russia but also the complicated world in which we are living.

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