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ARTICLE

The Local Dynamics of Nation Building: Identity Politics and Constructions of the Russian Nation in Kazan and Ekaterinburg

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Abstract

This article explores the role of place-based identity politics in constructions of the Russian nation by nongovernmental actors in the cities of Kazan and Ekaterinburg. Departing from more established approaches to the study of nation building concerned with elite strategies and actions, it contributes to an emerging line of inquiry focused on the agency of mesolevel actors. Drawing on interviews and analysis of public communications, the article demonstrates that actors such as museums, activist groups, and religious institutions creatively employ mainstream discursive practices present also in state narratives to anchor the nation in local symbols. At the same time, they position themselves in locally specific identity cleavages concerning city, regional, and ethnonational minority identities. The findings show that the imbrication of local identity politics in their narratives can problematize nation building by exposing contradictions in federal discourses or troubling the association of nation and state. Emphasizing the importance of locally situated processes of constructing the nation in conjunction with other scales of belonging, the article argues that nation building in Russia is complicated by mesolevel practices of identity making that can simultaneously support and subvert it.

Keywords: nation building; national identity; Russia; narratives; placemaking

Nation building is often equated with the mass consolidation of a national identity resulting from the policies of ruling elites promoting a vision of the nation that legitimizes the state. However, the concept has begun to be reconsidered in light of developments in the literature on nationalism highlighting the role of human agency in constructing the nation. Research taking a bottom-up perspective has shown that diverse actors shape nation building through meso- and microlevel practices (Isaacs and Polese 2015, 2016). Building on this work, this study advances an understanding of nation building as an uneven process initiated by elites but shaped by actors with varying degrees of power and influence. In particular, it brings attention to the importance of local identity politics in narratives mediating state discourses of the nation, and their effects on nation building.

As Wimmer (2018) has shown, nation building is not a transitory process restricted to the early period of a state's political consolidation but a long-running project, inherited by successive governments. Nevertheless, new or newly reconfigured states can provide particularly insightful case studies for observing nation-building policies in action. Unable to rely on the public legitimacy of previous governments' constructions of current political boundaries as reflective of a historical

collective, the leadership of such a state must work hard to (re)construct a state-linked nation and normalize identification with it. This is particularly true for multinational states, where state-linked nation-building efforts must account for the existence of other claims to nationhood (Norman 2006). Nation building invariably involves the suppression of difference through the acculturation of minorities (Eriksen 1992), though the manner, scope, and depth of such processes varies (Kymlicka 2000). This article explores the case of post-Soviet Russia, where the state vision for a statist Russian national community contends with strong regional and territorialized minority ethnonational identities and a recent precedent of state collapse along ethnoterritorial lines. Putin's nation-building efforts have centered on the idea of patriotism as a Russian value uniting people of different ethnonational backgrounds, repurposing a discourse used by Soviet and pre-Revolutionary authorities. However, the effectiveness of post-Soviet nation building in Russia has been variable to date (Goode 2018, 2020a). Survey studies have indicated geographical differences in how the nation is understood and in the resonance of patriotism (Rutland 2015; Zajda 2015). National identity is often narratively interlinked with regional and local identities, such as where Russia acts as a key reference point for post-Soviet urban placemaking (Parts 2018). This can create place-specific identity politics implicating different scales of belonging. Attending to these local dynamics offers an important, often overlooked avenue into understanding how agency at the mesolevel can affect nation building. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Kazan and Ekaterinburg in 2017–2018, this article pursues this line of inquiry through the study of narratives in two major cities with contrasting ethnocultural compositions and historical identities.

Below, I first discuss questions of agency in nationalism and nation building and outline a perspective on constructions of the nation as situated in place. These two starting points inform a subsequent review of the challenges to official nation building posed by micro- and mesolevel constructions of the nation in Russia. In the empirical sections, I illustrate the effects of local cleavages in identity politics on constructions of the nation in the narratives of nongovernmental actors in Kazan and Ekaterinburg, respectively. In particular, I consider the use of different discursive practices connecting local, regional, and national scales.

The findings show that nongovernmental actors narrate the past, present, and future of culture using mainstream discursive practices to situate Russian nationhood in relation to the region and city while contributing to locally salient debates over identity. As such, they illustrate the importance of place to the ways in which such actors exercise agency in contributing to the plurality of Russian identities. Most significantly, the article contributes evidence that nongovernmental actors can play a contradictory role in nation building, supporting it by rendering national history relatable to local audiences while also weakening it by disrupting official constructions of the link between national and subnational identities or disassociating the nation from the state. These findings advance understanding of the processes shaping contemporary Russian nationalism and nation building, and particularly the role played by public actors in spheres outside of politics and locations beyond Moscow. More broadly, the study strengthens understanding of nation building as shaped by mesolevel practices, demonstrating the local political dimension of the development of mass national identity.

Nationalism, Nation Building, and Questions of Agency

It has been convincingly argued that nationalist ideology has become embedded in institutions and practices at all levels of society, from government policy making and media production to everyday practices, such that the nation has become taken for granted as a universal category of identification (Billig 1995; Malešević 2019). At the same time, constructions of the nation and national identity are plural and actively contested at the vernacular level, as well as in public discourse (Bhabha 1990; Verdery 1993). Numerous scholars have observed that the forms given to the nation and the application of national categories come about through creative, varied, and personally meaningful individual acts (Thompson 2001; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008; Hearn 2007). These include not only acts of public messaging on behalf of influential institutions but ordinary acts in everyday life, such

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as identifying practices as national or claiming national identity in certain contexts and not others (Brubaker et al. 2006). In other words, the reproduction of nationalism involves distributed agency. The potential explanatory power of accounting for this in analysis of macrolevel dynamics of nationalism continues to elicit debate in nationalism studies (Bonikowski 2016; Hearn and Antonsich 2018).

The agency of diverse actors in constructing the nation has received more limited attention in studies of nation building. This term is typically used to describe the process through which elites encourage mass identification with a vision of the nation as aligned with the boundaries of the state (Mylonas 2012, xx). Williams and Smith describe nation building as "an instrument for implanting a sense of national solidarity and consciousness, and of homogenizing and levelling heterogeneous and stratified populations" (1983, 510). In the case of multinational states, this is observed to involve processes repressing minority national identities and elite-level negotiations over mechanisms affording rights and powers to different nations (Norman 2006; Kymlicka 2000). Adopting this top-down perspective, studies of nation building often focus on macrolevel and elite-led processes, such as the forging of alliances across ethnic and regional divides (Wimmer 2018) and the involvement of international and geostrategic concerns in nation-building policies (Mylonas 2012). With the collapse of the USSR, many scholars turned attention to nation-building mechanisms through which leaders sought legitimacy for newly forming states and their regimes (Kuzio 2002; Brubaker 2011; Akturk 2010), and the types of nationalism promoted in their narratives (Panov 2010; Shevel 2011). This spurt of nation-building literature also brought attention to challenges to nation building resulting from contestation over conceptions of the nation and resistance to the visions promoted (Leshchenko 2004; Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2011). These challenges point to the importance of agency among actors with different levels of influence in shaping the course of nation building. As Isaacs and Polese (2016, 2015) have argued, official nation building relies on the acceptance and reproduction of discourses at the micro- and mesolevels, and these are not the only responses to such discourses. Furthermore, state-endorsed symbols of the nation often create space for interpretation of its meaning and attributes. Competition between visions put forward by different actors can create public debate, as Sumartojo (2013) illustrates in the case of the Fourth Plinth on London's Trafalgar Square. Narratives produced by public-facing organizations outside of the political arena, such as museums, concretize the meanings of national symbols in their own ways (Levitt 2015; Blakkisrud and Kuziev 2019).

Despite significant discussion about agency in constructions of the nation and the deployment of national categories, there has been limited reflection on the extent to which micro- and mesolevel practices reinforce an understanding of the nation-state as the embodiment of the national community, and thus contribute to nation building. Hearn and Antonsich allude to this in noting that "while banal nationalism clearly works for legitimizing the idea of the nation-state in the eyes of its members, it is not as clear how everyday nationalism stands in relation to the same question" (2018, 595). There is, of course, a methodological challenge to capturing the political implications of everyday acts that reproduce the nation, since this would often require accessing unarticulated motivations. Furthermore, everyday references to the nation need not entail elaborated thoughts on its political meaning (Castelló and Mihelj 2018, 562). However, evidence from less ordinary practices beyond everyday life indicates that micro- and mesolevel constructions of the nation do not necessarily support nation building and can in fact undermine it. Benwell, Núñez, and Amigo (2018) show that mobilization around national flags can occur in the name of political claims against the state. Nonstate actors have been found to contest nation-building discourses, linking the nation to stories and symbols unrelated to the state, even in authoritarian regimes (Isaacs 2016). And while they may be an expected source of resistance to nation building, actors representing minorities in multiethnic states sometimes contribute to it in advancing minority political agendas (Davenel and Yim 2016). This study therefore begins with an understanding of nation building as an elite-initiated endeavor with an uneven trajectory shaped by complex, interactive, and multidirectional processes through which public conceptions of the nation evolve.

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Although the nation is imagined as a political as well as a cultural community (Anderson 1983), its existing political incarnation can inspire mixed feelings and alternative narratives. This article approaches this aspect of agency in nationalism, examining mesolevel narratives that can impact the course of nation building.

Place and the Construction of the Nation in Postsocialist Cities

In addressing the role of nongovernmental actors, I wish to draw attention to the effects of place-based contexts on their narratives. My understanding of the impact of place begins with the three dimensions of the concept identified by Agnew (2002): locale, the material setting of everyday social life; location, identifying a place in relation to other sites and scales; and sense of place, concerning subjective associations. These three senses of place can be seen to interact in creating locally specific conditions with which actors engage in producing narratives. Structures and cultures that locate a place in relational terms can be reflected in material settings, for example, in the grandeur of capital-city architecture. People's sense of place, in turn, can be shaped by discourses and practices of location, for example, those locating Israel as a homeland in relation to Jewish diaspora communities (Abramson 2017). Mesolevel narratives are therefore situated in place in so far as they are articulated within a context where salient topics and structural constraints and incentives narrators face are shaped by the interaction of location, locale, and sense of place. In addition, the processes and networks that make a local context particular are constantly shifting (Massey 2005). In focusing my analysis on two cities, I am concerned with the impact of interplays of discourses and processes particular to these cities at a given time on constructions of the statist Russian nation by actors embedded and invested in them. Furthermore, I am interested in the agency of mesolevel actors in constructing the nation as part of placemaking at multiple scales. Local sites and memories can provide meaningful targets of collective sentiment that boost local and regional pride while concretizing central state discourses of the nation (Jones and Desforges 2003; Pilkington 2012; Traube 2007). In giving meaning to the nation, people thus also relate to other categories of belonging with different scalar imaginaries, such as the city, region, or transnational religious community. Antonsich (2018) shows how vernacular constructions of the nation in the narratives of Italians with migrant backgrounds implicate multiple scales and blur identification with local and national place. Such processes can recast the connection between scales of belonging in ways that sideline the state, such as in visions of the nation as a wider community rooted in localism (Confino and Skaria 2002).

Finally, places are constructed in terms of temporal as well as spatial relations. Different readings of a place's past inform competing understandings of its present and visions for its future (Massey 1995). Postsocialist cities present particularly interesting cases of the meeting of different spatialities and temporalities in the local production of place and of the nation. Cityscapes have been dramatically overhauled as authorities and corporate actors have sought to erase communist symbolism and project new local, regional, national, and global identities, motivated by the tandem needs of consolidating support for new regimes and attracting investment for economic development (Diener and Hagen 2013). The shifting nature of the construction of place is accelerated by the degree and pace of postsocialist transitions and also by the ubiquity of visual urban symbols of communism to be replaced. At the same time, actors renarrating the postsocialist city do not jettison the past altogether but recombine symbols from different eras in which to anchor new histories and visions. Rapid change brings contention: elite-led placemaking projects in postsocialist cities have at times led to clashing juxtapositions and met resistance (Fauve 2015).

The politics of place in cities has been shown to impact the development of a nation's mainstream symbolic repertoire (Jones and Desforges 2003). Cities are also sites from which divergences from state conceptions of national identity can emerge (Downing 2015). While studies of bottom-up actions affecting post-Soviet nation building have often focused on capital cities, this

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study will highlight the significance of the location of actors in cities in peripheral regions of Russia that have distinct dynamics of contention concerning national identity.

Challenges to Russian Nation Building and the Role of Local Actors

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the importance of the ethnic factor in its dissolution made it challenging but imperative for the authorities of the multinational, post-Soviet Russian state to craft a narrative linking the state to nationhood in the public imagination. Yeltsin favored a liberal path, and early in his presidency he made efforts to contrast the new Russia with its Soviet predecessor, emphasizing a redirection away from totalitarian statehood. This discourse followed a dominant idea in liberal circles at the time that Russia was on an inevitable, long-fought path toward democracy (Verkhovskii and Pain 2012). It relied on a civic conception of the nation as comprised of Russia's citizens, inspired by democratic and capitalist economies (Tuminez 2000). However, seeking to appease different segments of the public, Yeltsin's government also constructed continuity with Russia's imperial mission and revived Soviet symbols, as well as portraying Russia as a pan-Slavic community, a community of Russian speakers, and an ethnic community (Shevel 2011). The ambivalence and inconsistency in representing a liberal civic path for the nation compounded the economic and social instability of the 1990s to leave a public disillusioned in its promises. By the early 2000s a civilizational nationalism, rooted in a historical view of Russia as following a unique conservative path, had gained popularity among the Russian public (Verkhovskii and Pain 2012). Putin was able to exploit the shift in public mood, championing statist patriotism as a point of convergence for Russians of all backgrounds and promoting pride in a distinct Russian civilization based in conservative values (Verpoest and Claessen 2017). Under Putin, collective memory has been instituted as the key basis for patriotism through traditional mechanisms such as school textbooks, museums, and commemorative days, but also online campaigns and partnerships with nongovernmental actors (Bürger 2016). The past is increasingly politicized, with the USSR's role in World War II pivotal to official narratives of the nation and a 2014 law criminalizing the conscious public expression of lies about the war (Malinova 2017; Linchenko and Golovashina 2019). Yet, in response to changing challenges to the regime's legitimacy, the historical content used by elites to support the discourse of patriotism has become more varied, not only between actors but between narratives produced by single actors at different times (Sherlock 2016; Chaterjee-Doody and Tolz 2020). In this way, the notion of patriotism continues to provide a malleable basis for nation building.

There is no doubt that the concept of Russia as a nation-state has gained public buy-in under Putin. The discourse of a nation with strong continuity destabilized periodically by the conspiracies of the West is replicated in vernacular narratives in connection to deteriorated diplomatic relations with the USA and Europe in recent years (Blackburn 2018). Official hailing of Soviet achievements is well received, with nationwide polls recording increasing nostalgia for the USSR (Levada Center 2019) and Soviet memory seen as a point of connection with the national past among young people (Kasamara, Sorokina, and Maximenkova 2018). The annexation of Crimea in 2014 boosted patriotic sentiment, superseding ethnic minority resentment of assimilatory policies as well as middle-class disaffection with Putin's erosion of democracy that surfaced around his third election to presidential office (Sharafutdinova 2020). At the same time, official discourses of national identity have not become uniformly accepted. A 2016 proposal for a law codifying the (statist) Russian nation was indefinitely suspended following resistance from representatives of ethnic minority republics and religious groups (Rustamova 2017). Behind the generalized trends in patriotic sentiment lie significant divisions in conceptions of the nation. Polls show disparities in attitudes to the national past, including pride and shame associated with the Revolution, Stalin's purges, the figure of Stalin, and memory of the Great Patriotic War (Levada Center 2019). Thus, unprocessed and divisive collective memory continues to pose challenges to nation building. Tellingly, the concept of patriotism is often interpreted as having little to do with the state, instead

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connoting personal attachment to a more abstract, temporally and spatially undefined *rodina* (Motherland), *malaya rodina* (little Motherland), or family (Le Huérou 2015; Goode 2018). While Putin has sought to equate the Motherland with the state, populist opposition groups have amplified its broader meaning and portrayed it as a victim of the state's actions (Riabov 2020). There is also evidence that younger Russians, though more exposed to Putin's dedicated education programs on the subject, are comparatively unpersuaded by patriotism as loyalty to the state (Baekken 2021; Le Huérou 2015).

Given these limits to the success of nation building in Russia, it seems pertinent to unpack the processes through which federal discourses of the nation are mediated. As Goode (2020a) notes, nation building relies on the interested compliance of mesolevel actors as mediators of state discourses. There are particularly strong grounds for accounting for the geographical situatedness of such actors in Russia. While increasingly politically centralized, the state spans contexts highly differentiated in terms of distance from Moscow, proximity to national borders, and ethnic composition. Regional identities are strong even beyond ethnic republics (Clowes 2016). The legacy of a reinterpretation of the periphery as challenger and innovator to the center in Russian thought of the 1980s is retained in continued efforts to express regional consciousness and narrate the local and regional past (Clowes, Erbslöh, and Kokobobo 2018). Furthermore, there are regional differences in understandings of the Russian nation, affecting, for example, attitudes to the role of oil and gas in Russian national identity (Rutland 2015) and teachers' perceptions of bias in accounts of national history in federally approved textbooks (Zajda 2015). Unequal access to state resources may matter in this regard: residents of the disputed Southern Kuril Islands (Northern Territories) displayed shifts in national identity depending on the relative regional investment of Russia and Japan (Richardson 2016). Focusing attention on the place-based nature of narratives can help dig down into regional differences observed in the impact of nation building.

The state clearly recognizes the importance of nongovernmental actors and locally produced narratives to nation building. The 2016–2020 State Program on Patriotic Education included an aim to regulate interaction between federal, regional, and local administrative bodies and "state, community and non-profit organizations conducting patriotic education" (Government of the Russian Federation 2015). Nonprofit actors deemed to support regime priorities have been strengthened by new funding channels for patriotic activities, while politically disfavored organizations have suffered from reduced income avenues and reputation (Daucé 2014; Skokova, Pape, and Krasnopolskaya 2018). This selective federal endorsement and patronization of local initiatives incentivizes local elites to also support activities branded as patriotic (Goode 2020a). At the same time, as potential co-constructors of the Russian nation, local actors are not mere conveyors of state discourse; they are spatially situated, and their investment in local and regional identities can also bring to bear in their narratives. Memory and place-based experience can be mobilized in constructions of national identity, sometimes creating distance from the state (Bell 2018; Pilkington 2012). In ethnic republics, some cultural productions by minority nationalists portray Russia as the ethnonational Other, rather than a state-linked Motherland (Romero 2018; Gradskova 2018). Attending to the politics of place that emerge from contestation over identity is therefore an important entry point into understanding the potential impact of mesolevel constructions of the nation.

Methods

The study is based on a qualitative analysis of public narratives of the Russian nation in Kazan and Ekaterinburg. These were collected during fieldwork visits in 2017–2018 through interviews with representatives of ten nongovernmental actors, documentation of their websites and exhibitions, and participant observation of their events. For effective comparison, the cities were selected following a "most similar" approach to case studies: while possessing many similarities, they differ in key characteristics (Seawright and Gerring 2008). Both are regional centers with around one

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million inhabitants and have experienced significant redevelopment in the post-Soviet period as a result of high levels of capital investment, urban redevelopment, inward migration, and international activity such as the hosting of major sporting events. Both were also central to active, regional autonomous movements in the 1990s. Meanwhile, their contrasting ethnonational compositions and unique historical contexts enable comparative study of the effects of place on constructions of the nation. As such, these cities exemplify the variety in identity politics found in major cities across Russia.

Kazan, located on the Volga River in Central European Russia, is the administrative center of the Republic of Tatarstan, the designated homeland of the Tatar people, Russia's largest ethnonational minority. Although a 1990s project of political sovereignty for Tatarstan was abandoned in the wake of Putin's centralization drive, Kazan has continued to be remodeled in the style of a national capital. Its ethnically mixed population and cultural past have been used to brand Kazan a symbol of Russia's enduring multiethnic harmony, a cornerstone of Putin's narratives of the nation (Graney 2007). Meanwhile, assimilationist federal policies have inspired increasing cultural Tatar nationalism in the city (Yusupova 2018). Ekaterinburg, the administrative center of Sverdlovsk Province and the broader Ural Federal District, is located just east of the Ural Mountains, considered the boundary between European and Asian Russia, and is home to a majority ethnic Russian population. The Russian Orthodox Church and affiliated institutions have invested significantly in rebranding the city as the inspiration for a revival of prerevolutionary conservative Orthodox values in memory of Tsar Nicholas II, assassinated there in 1918. This narrative competes with concurrent investments in the city's image as the heart of Russian liberalism, realized in the 2015 inauguration of the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center.

A purposive sampling approach was used to include a range of types of nongovernmental actors, including museums, cultural centers, activist groups, and religious institutions. This enabled the identification of patterns across the narratives of actors with different mandates, as well as analysis of the specificity of particular cases. The narrative analysis followed a discursive approach, attending to the social and situated nature of how people construct events and position themselves in a given context (Gergen and Gergen 2007; Taylor 2007). Narratives are not simply accounts conveying experience or facts but mechanisms through which people interpret and represent reality and themselves in it within a given social, cultural, and political context (Lawler 2002, 2008). Narratives can therefore be understood to have functions, in that they achieve something in a social interaction, whether the speaker is conscious of it or not (Riessman 2008). From this understanding, I looked for discursive practices constructing the Russian nation and subnational identities, both separately and in relation to each other, and positioning the actor in relation to debates concerning these. In doing so, I attended to the interpretation of culturally and politically normative discourses in circulation. All data were produced and analyzed in Russian, with illustrative quotes translated for this article. The discussion presented below focuses on the narratives of six of the actors studied.

The fieldwork for this study took place during a period of heightened tension in identity politics in Kazan surrounding the introduction of a federal law abolishing compulsory teaching of non-Russian languages in schools, along with Moscow's symbolic refusal to renew an expired Federation Treaty on the regional autonomy of Tatarstan (Mukhamedzhanov 2017). These developments compounded the securitization of identity politics in an increasingly authoritarian context in raising the sensitivity of interviews about identity narratives. Interviewees often displayed caution in their responses and noted the compatibility of their narratives with (official discourses of) multiethnic harmony. Similarly, in Ekaterinburg, interviewees avoided criticizing the political structures behind conditions that they hinted were unfavorable for advancing positive collective identities. This caution presented certain challenges to the research, as observed elsewhere in authoritarian contexts, particularly concerning interviewee vulnerability, performance in responses, and the potential for sensitive questions to close down a conversation (Yusupova 2019; Richardson 2014; Goode 2010). Monitoring comfort levels and maintaining spontaneity therefore became important elements of the interview approach, and abilities I honed during the

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process. In analyzing interview data, I learned much from attending to positioning and to things left unsaid. Triangulating interview data with the content of organizations' public outputs helped in this process, as did possessing a good grasp of the local, regional and, national political context of the time.

Kazan

Official municipal and regional narratives of Kazan as a symbol of Russia's multicultural harmony often involve the discursive practice of identity nesting. This practice constructs a hierarchy of scales of belonging, for example, to a city, region, and nation (Herb and Kaplan 1999), implying that identification with smaller and larger scale reference points are compatible and mutually supportive. In narratives about Kazan and Tatarstan, identity nesting is also used to place ethnic identities, understood as fitting within a statist Russian identity. This understanding underpins federal policies on ethnocultural diversity and originates in Soviet nationalities policy (Slezkine 1994; Rutland 2010). In a speech marking Tatarstan's annual Day of the Republic, the republic president Rustam Minnikhanov stated: "This memorable day unites all people of Tatarstan (*Tatarstantsy*) who cherish the values of patriotism, hard work, and respect for the traditions of multiethnic Russia and their home republic" (Press Service of the President of the Republic of Tatarstan 2020). By linking feelings for the republic and the multiethnic state in this way, local political actors in Kazan comply with federal pressure to reinforce patriotic sentiment while also indicating support for the strong substate and ethnic identities of their constituencies. The idea of nested identities continues to retain broad popularity among the Russian public (Blackburn 2020). However, in Kazan it sits in tension with a perception that Tatar and Russian cultures compete for survival in the region. In a context of federal policy developments restricting minority cultural rights and an abandoned project for regional political sovereignty, the Russian nation can be perceived as assimilative and encroaching. Meanwhile, in response to the growing visibility of cultural Tatar nationalism, activist groups have formed in defense of ethnic Russian culture and Russian language education. While these narratives are present more widely in Tatarstan, the dynamics of tension are particularly enlivened in the politically and economically concentrated and culturally mixed context of Kazan. The following discussion explores their effects on constructions of the Russian nation by three nongovernmental actors in the city: the National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, the Tatar Youth Forum, and the Russian National Cultural Alliance of the Republic of Tatarstan.

The National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan is a prominent multisited actor funded primarily by the regional government. The museum presents itself as "the main repository of the historical and cultural heritage of the republic" (National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan n.d., "Obschije svedenija") and also frames its activities as fostering Russian patriotism, as seen in a statement regarding its work with children: "The main goal is patriotic, aesthetic education through the development of knowledge of the history, culture, and nature of the native land [*krai*], and the development of a schoolchild's identity" (National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan n.d., "Kul'turno-obrazovatel'naja dejatel'nost'"). In practice, the museum reproduces the mainstream identity nesting discourse but understates Russian statist identity. A key theme running through the museum's exhibits is the historical continuity of harmonious coexistence between ethnic groups in the region. In an exhibition entitled "The Peoples of Tatarstan through the Prism of the Centuries," the opening panel reads: "The exhibition introduces the ethnocultural uniqueness of Tatarstan, where diversity and distinctiveness have closely intertwined, along with the centuries-long traditions of the peoples of the republic … Folk holidays are celebrated across the whole republic, carrying their history from the depths of the centuries" (National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan 2018a).

Absent from this narrative of the region is any reference to tension between Russian and non-Russian ethnonational identities in the past or present, leaving a rose-tinted impression of cultural harmony untouched by politics. Interestingly, although multiple ethnic identities are seen

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here to nest within regional identity, the Russian state is not mentioned. In addition, the museum takes care to highlight the importance of ethnic and regional identities in their own right. One example is coverage of historical events in the Tatar quest for sovereignty. As a curator emphasized, the museum's centenary exhibition on the Russian Revolution deliberately highlighted the movement for the creation of a Tatar national republic during this period and its brief fruition: "My colleagues very clearly noted that for the Kazan province, the national question was always very salient. And so, in the top area of this exhibition we specifically show the resolution of the national question about the creation of a republic" (S. Izmailova, personal communication, April 21, 2018). Despite this emphasis, no connection is drawn in the exhibition between the early 20th century developments toward Tatar sovereignty and the renewal of activism in the 1990s, framed then as reviving the long-desired national political trajectory advanced in the earlier period (Faller 2011; Williams 2011). This omission leaves it up to exhibition visitors to draw their own conclusions and thus avoids the controversial suggestion that Tatar national claims might challenge or compete with Russian patriotism.

Presenting a regional view on the past, the museum thus selects and frames content to balance adherence to the mainstream discourse of nested identities and patriotism with adherence to its regional mandate and sensitivity to different understandings of the relationship between place, ethnicity, and nation within its audience. Another example of this can be seen in the permanent exhibition of a subsidiary branch, the Great Patriotic War Memorial Museum, which displays personal items belonging to soldiers and details the fate of men and women of the region who took part in the war. The text of panels accompanying the exhibits repeatedly blurs loyalty to the region and to the wider people of the state as homeland. At the same time, it suggests emotional connections between the war generation and today's residents as a basis for continuity of identity. One panel reads:

> Currently over 279 thousand veterans of the Great Patriotic War live in Tatarstan, among whom over 29 thousand took part in the Great Patriotic War and around 250 thousand were workers on the home front. They are concerned about the military patriotic upbringing of the generation growing up today, the future of their children and grandchildren. Today's generation should know and remember the past. It is important not to allow extremism to emerge in order to prevent wars and preserve peace on our planet. In Tatarstan, people remember and honor the heroism of the people in the years of the Great Patriotic War. A Memorial Book of Tatarstan with the names of fallen countrymen [*zemliaki*] has been published in 26 volumes. (National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan 2018b)

While the Russian nation is not explicitly mentioned here, the state as nation is implied in the language of patriotism and the home front. The expression of admiration for the patriotism of a previous Tatarstan generation, ongoing continuity of memory of "the past," and desire for its continuity into the future together portray the regional manifestation of a wider collective culture aligning with the state. Continuity is implied in the suggestion of an intergenerational link formed by the concern of living veterans for the upholding of patriotic values among new generations, as well as the materialization of today's regional reverence for the past victors in the form of a book. This lends moral weight to the concept of a statist Russian nation united by patriotic devotion that endures regardless of the change of borders, population, and state structure, aligning with federal policy on memory and patriotic education. Yet, the collective is also constructed as regional; for example, the term *zemliaki* implies countrymen in a regional sense, thus indicating only people from Tatarstan. The reference to "the people" remembered and honored is ambiguous, potentially denoting a regional or state-wide community. This blurring of identity groups serves to mitigate local sensitivities over which identity referent Tatarstan's residents today feel they belong to. In this way, the museum can encourage all visitors to identify as carriers of memory and loyalty, while addressing political incentives to ostensibly support Russian nation building. Reproducing the

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nesting of identities for a local audience can thus take subtle forms. The museum's narratives depicting long-term continuity of regional interethnic harmony and unity contribute to a place-making process that neither contradicts nor clearly endorses official Russian nation building. Instead, it gently implies the legitimacy of the state with a more explicitly region-building account of multiethnic unity.

Russia is constructed quite differently in the narratives of the Tatar Youth Forum, a community and network organization supporting the revival of national consciousness among young Tatars. The Forum strives to find creative ways to make Tatar identity appealing and relevant to young people, responding to concerns about the increasing dominance of the Russian language in the region and a perception of Tatar culture as vulnerable. In doing so, it supports an emerging Tatar urban youth culture that has become prominent in Kazan in recent years (Poliakov, Omelchenko, and Garifzyanova 2020; Suleymanova 2018; Friedli 2012, 2018). Rather than nesting identities under a statist Russian identity, the Youth Forum's narratives construct boundaries between Russia's (ethnic) nations and identify a need to keep a sense of them as separate. The Forum chair describes confronting the public with the idea that disengagement with the national language and distance from its traditions are an existential problem for the Tatars:

> When I present for an audience, I always ask, "What´s the first thing you think of when people mention the Tatar language?" They say, you know, "Grandpa, grandma, a *tyubeteika*,[1] *Sabbantui*,"[2] things like that. I ask them what those things have in common, and they reply that they were invented a thousand years ago, that they were part of everyday life a long time ago. I say, "That means our language is pretty much dying if it's associated with that past." (T. Yarullin, personal communication, April 20, 2018)

The Forum thus publicly articulates its concerns about the trajectory of Tatar culture given its status within Russia. As the deputy chair of the Forum puts it, "There is a problem with the positioning of Tatar culture" (A. Faizrakhmanov, personal communication, May 10, 2018). The association of the Tatar language and culture with older generations and out of date practices is understood as indicating a lack of renewal and a trend toward assimilation into a Russian substrand of globalized culture. The deputy chair explains that "Russian cultural formats are partly copied from anglophone ones which come from Moscow to the provinces. It's like a double globalization, and that globalization is presented to us as something important and necessary for us." By identifying the fate of the regional and the particular—Tatar national culture in Tatarstan—as undermined by the spread of general, global "Russian cultural formats," the Youth Forum constructs the statist Russian nation as a national Other. The practice of Othering derives from a relational understanding of the national self that leads to an impetus to maintain distinctiveness from other nations (Triandafyllidou 1998). As the deputy chair later notes, "Use of Russian has grown, and associating yourself with the Russian Federation has become more widespread, and that detachment, you know, that sense that we are different, it's going" (A. Faizrakhmanov, personal communication, May 10, 2018). In contrast to nation-building narratives of Russia's harmonious multiethnic unity and the mutually reinforcing nature of ethnic, regional, and statist identities, the premise here is that the growth of statist Russian national identity endangers the continuity of the Tatar nation.

Triandafyllidou (1998) argues that confrontation with the significant Other at a time of cultural or political crisis for the nation transforms its identity by bringing out its relevance in a contemporary reality. In this case, although representatives of the Youth Forum use the language of crisis, explicit confrontation with the Other is politically nonviable. However, Russia as the significant Other is made present implicitly in activists' promotion of the need to regenerate. Rather than reviving a victim narrative prevalent in public narratives before the fall of the Soviet Union (Rorlich 1999), the Forum frames the problem facing Tatar culture as one of outmodedness or a need for revitalization. This both softens the implication of criticism of the state and takes a proactive stance, offering the community agency in transforming its fate. Many of the Forum's activities highlight

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Kazan's Tatar heritage and reclaim local sites as Tatar rather than Russian. Similarly to other urban youth activist initiatives in Kazan, the Forum blends symbols of tradition with contemporary cultural forms and uses urban history to link Tatars today to their past (Suleymanova 2018). Its signature public-oriented activity is an annual street festival attracting thousands of visitors, inspired by a bazaar located in the old Tatar district of Kazan at the turn of the 19th century, popularized in national lore by the poet and Tatar hero Gabdullah Tuqay. The Forum chair describes how it began:

> It's a symbolic place, but practically everyone had forgotten about it. We decided to recreate it, and on Tuqay Memorial Day … we came out onto the streets, dressed like a hundred years ago. One person dressed as a market vendor, another as a loader, you know, the people who carry things, and we sold the things they used to sell in the old days. One person brought something homemade, some accessories, clothes with Tatar ethnic features … And there was an open mike; anyone who wanted could speak. One person did a reading, then there was music, we published a newspaper. (T. Yarullin, personal communication, April 20, 2018)

The chair and deputy chair both express the achievements of the Forum in terms of their success in adapting Tatar themes into marketable events, practices, and symbols that attract demand and interest in identifying as Tatar, rather than imploring people to preserve values and practices eroded by assimilative policies. The Russian nation is thus not framed as a threatening presence. Yet, the absence of identity nesting in the Forum's public narratives leaves clear the distinction between their approach and that of actors such as the National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan. In this view, Tatar identity is not safe under Russia's wing but rather needs to become competitive in its own right. As Friedli notes, "Tatar urban youth see the city not as a cosmopolis where identities are merged and multiplied and boundaries blurred but as a place of distinction and competition for recognition" (2012, 14). In reclaiming spaces in the city as sites of Tatar revival, the Forum contributes to an alternative placemaking process in which the local banalization of Russian culture is questioned and disrupted.

Another side to this tension present in Kazan can be seen in the narratives of actors defending ethnic Russian culture. The status of Kazan as capital of an ethnic republic makes it a location within the Russian state where the Russian nation understood in ethnic terms can be experienced as marginal. In this context, the Russian National Cultural Alliance of the Republic of Tatarstan was established in 2012 to "contribute to the realization of the constitutional rights of the Russian people to preserve their distinctive character, develop the Russian language, education, and national culture" (Russian National Cultural Alliance 2012, 3). To this end, local member organizations conduct public activities including folklore performances, celebrations of Orthodox festive days, training events for Russian language educators, and projects to commemorate heroes of Russian culture. Since 2012, the alliance has represented the Russian nation in the regional Peoples' Friendship House, a prominent center supporting national traditions and interethnic harmony. In this role, the alliance has replaced a group known as the Society for Russian Culture of the Republic of Tatarstan. While the latter, most active in the early 2000s, was explicitly political in its awareness-raising activities[3], the new alliance's efforts are focused on cultural engagement, a more viable choice given the conditions of strengthened authoritarianism and securitized ethnic politics of recent years. In a public interview, cochair of the alliance Irina Alexandrovskaya sidesteps a question about the problems the Russian nation faces today and instead emphasizes the need to foster patriotism "including through the work of our national cultural alliances" (Peoples' Friendship House Tatarstan 2017, pt. 4:50). Seemingly, then, the alliance reinforces the mainstream discourse of ethnic identity nesting within statist Russian identity. Yet, it operates on the basis of

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relational nationalist claims and a position Othering Tatars in the republic. This is evident in its public account of the contribution of Russian cultural and religious values and practices to the region over centuries:

> Russian culture has a consolidating, unifying significance in Russia. And so, on the territory of the [old] Kazan region, due to well-known historical circumstances, Russians were the main socially generative force, which gave them great responsibility for its political, economic, and cultural development. In modern Tatarstan, Russian people, making up more than 40% of its population and constituting the ethnic majority in large cities, continue to play a significant role in the functioning of the republic, reviving as far as they are able their thousand year national cultural and Orthodox religious traditions. (Russian National Cultural Alliance of the Republic of Tatarstan, n.d.)

This text legitimizes the Russian national claim to the region in implicit defense against an exclusive Tatar national claim. The thousand-year national trajectory, a trope popularized by Putin to support a statist vision of the nation (Malinova 2019), is put to use in defending the position of ethnic Russians in Tatarstan. The website also states that "the RNCO's focus of attention is the spiritual and historical legacy of the nation, which needs to be nurtured and developed" (Russian National Cultural Alliance of the Republic of Tatarstan, n.d.). Such references to spirituality and the Orthodox Church indicate a narrower understanding of the Russian nation than that of federal narratives of the multiethnic patriotic nation. Indeed, the focus of attention is Russian culture, defined in ethnic terms, and its lead role in the context of a shared, multiethnic state. The subsuming of the ethnic Other in the regional context is celebrated in positive terms such as "socially generative" and "responsibility." The circumstances of the capture of Kazan by Ivan the Terrible are alluded to without critical assessment, despite this event being considered a national loss for many Tatars. This perspective recalls the later Soviet discourse of Russians as the "state-forming nation," continued in the rhetoric of Russian ethnonationalist groups, and which Putin has used at times when nationalist constituencies needed to be appeased (Kolstø 2016). At the same time, the claimed need for a specifically regional revival of Russian culture suggests that the competition with the internal Other continues and highlights again the importance of regional tensions and regional identity in Russian nation-building narratives.

Othering narratives were more explicit in the communications of the former member organization of the Peoples' Friendship House, the Society for Russian Culture. An organizational history available online since 2003 explains concerns about the local loss of Russian cultural values and memory amid actions to promote Tatar identity and details confrontations with media and politicians in Kazan over Russian cultural claims (Society for Russian Culture of the Republic of Tatarstan 2003, 12–17, 21). Published in less politically restrictive times, this document highlights the relational nature of concerns about the ethnic Russian nation in the Tatarstan context that underpin the activities of the Russian National Cultural Alliance today. In her 2017 public interview, Alexandrovskaya highlights the alliance's recent advocacy for the erection of a cultural center honoring Alexander Pushkin beside the philharmonic concert hall named after Gabdullah Tuqay. This action represents a pursuit of local balance between national cultures in implicit competition. Thus, while Russian nationalist activists in Kazan have moved on from vocal Othering narratives in keeping with the political climate, their activities still entail a subtext of competing, rather than nesting, national identities.

To varying extents, the cases examined adopt a bottom-up view of the collective past and future, referencing localized, lived experience distinct from the generalizing bent of state-wide narratives of the nation. There is no explicit opposition voiced in the above examples to the notion of Russia as a nested, multiethnic statist nation. Yet, they show that identity-nesting discourses are not necessarily helpful and can be problematic in navigating place-based identity politics in a multiethnic, local context. Depending on their proximity to causes focused on the defense of ethnic rights, actors

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interpreting the nation for Kazan's diverse local public are seen to offer only superficial support for, or even undermine, the nation-building prerogative to normalize this discourse.

Ekaterinburg

Russia's provinces, a term associated with regions beyond the historical capitals of Moscow and St. Petersburg, have often been heralded as the true source of authentic national culture in essentializing narratives observed to both idealize and demean provincial places and their inhabitants (Parts 2018). The flexibility of official nation-building discourses about the provinces has allowed space for highly contradictory visions of the essence embodied by local place to develop. During the post-Soviet period, Ekaterinburg has seen the emergence of two clashing, national-symbolic repertoires associated with the city and the wider Urals region, backed by actors with significant political clout. On the one hand, the Russian Orthodox Church has hailed it the sacred place of the abrupt ending to the Romanov dynasty and the heart of a revival of traditionalist conservatism in its memory; on the other, the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center has promoted Ekaterinburg as the home of the late and first Russian president and the liberal values for which he stood. A more marginal vision of the city based on liberal humanist values has also emerged, partly in connection to the memory of victims of mass executions on the city outskirts under Stalin. Local tensions between these visions remain potent, as evident in the widely covered protests against the planned conversion of a public park into a new Orthodox cathedral that took place in the city in 2019, resulting in a suspension of construction after Putin intervened (Nechepurenko 2019). This section discusses these contrasting repertoires and the effects of the local tension between them on nation building, examining the narratives of the Ekaterinburg Diocese, the Yeltsin Center, and the Ekaterinburg History Museum.

The Orthodox Church has increasingly taken a prominent role in shaping mainstream discourses of patriotism in Russia, framing itself as central to the nation's cultural past and future (Rousselet 2015). The Ekaterinburg Diocese has been central to the promotion of a vision of the city as defined by the fate of Nicholas II and his family, canonized as martyrs, and as the natural source of a revival of traditional values inspired by their memory. In 2003, it oversaw the completion of the Cathedral on the Blood on the site of the assassinations, and new memorial buildings have been added alongside it since. The diocese hosts a series of annual events to commemorate the deaths, which have acquired patriotic meaning as acts of collective repentance and prayer for both the "little motherland" and the wider nation (Rousselet 2015). In the 2018 Public Forum for the Preservation of the Legacy of Tsar Nicholas II, marking a century since the tsar's death, Metropolitan Kirill, head of the Ekaterinburg Diocese, emphasized the role of the city, noting that it has become "a symbol of the tragedy of the tsar family, and … a tragedy for our homeland," adding, "Here it will soon be 100 years ago that tragic events took place—tragic for our people" (Metropolitan Kirill 2018). Other events organized by the diocese include a high-profile, annual 20-kilometer procession from the Church on the Blood to the resting place of the tsar's remains. Symbolic sites in and around the city thus play a vital role in the performance of public ritual constructing the nation as the community of memory envisaged by the church.

Arguably, the rooting of a vision of the nation embodied by its past leaders in local sites should support nation building. The events organized by the church provide opportunities for Ekaterinburg's residents to connect physically and emotionally with familiar local places as both material remnants of the national past and symbols of the atemporal national community. The nationwide publicity around these events creates a potential source of local pride in the significance accorded to the sites. The framing of Nicholas II as a symbol of the essence of the nation to be restored, rooted in Ekaterinburg, is reproduced in the narratives of other actors, such as the local branch of the Russia – My History Park, opened in 2017.[4] The park's director notes: "Since the history of our region is closely tied to the history of the Romanov household, our park has de facto become the first point on the Imperial Procession route in Ekaterinburg and in the whole of the Middle Urals" ("'Russia - My

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History' Park, Ekaterinburg," n.d.). The fact that the Church's narrative slots so readily into the park's statist portrayal of the Russian nation underscores its complementarity to official nation-building efforts. At the same time, this conception of the nation and the city at its heart is inevitably exclusive, as it is closely intertwined with the church's efforts to consolidate the Orthodox community and raise its profile as a broader moral authority. Metropolitan Kirill addresses the public at large when he states in a televised interview that "We need to reconsider [the memory of the tsar] and begin to live in a new way, to understand that everything that was, that's all ours, it's our history, it's our country, it's our people" (Ekaterinburg Diocese 2018b). However, at the 2018 Public Forum, the list of speakers consisted entirely of Orthodox leaders and academic scholars of Orthodoxy. Alongside talks, it included Orthodox prayer rituals led by the metropolitan and a performance of Orthodox choral music (Ekaterinburg Diocese 2018a). The church's use of the figure of the tsar binds nation and state, suggesting a message of loyalty to the present regime; but the church is also bound into this vision, and so Russia is presented unequivocally as a religious, and specifically Christian, nation. The exclusive optics of the commemorative events dedicated to Nicholas II only serve to highlight the uncomfortable fit of this narrative with federal discourses of Russia as a nation of multiethnic and multiconfessional unity.

Running counter to this ethnicized, conservative construction of local, regional, and national identity, a competing vision of Ekaterinburg and the Urals region identifies them as the heart of Russian liberalism. A driving force of this vision is the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center, established in 2015 by presidential decree to honor his legacy and foster civic debate. The center contains archives and a museum portraying Russian history through the lens of Yeltsin's presidency and early life, and it hosts exhibitions and events on contemporary social and cultural themes. As cofounder Pavel Lungin states,

> The main idea of the Yeltsin Center is that we are living and building a new Russia. Of course, it's still the same country that, with its thousands of historical cultural lines and all its genes, is linked to the original and eternal Russia. You may ask, what is new? [The answer is] that Freedom has appeared. We always thought that freedom would come from the West. But it came from the Urals, from the depths of Russia, in the persona of Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin. Our new Russia is a state based on freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom of opinion, freedom of enterprise, and many other freedoms. (Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center 2016)

This narrative presents a homegrown, native version of liberalism emerging in today's Russia as a result of Yeltsin's initiating reforms. Yeltsin's upbringing in the Urals is used to frame the region as the heart of the nation, the defining place from where Russian liberalism took root. Furthermore, this milestone in Russian state history is presented as linked to an "eternal" continuity of the nation's essence. This narrative is echoed in the Yeltsin Center's eight-minute animation on the history of Russia, which opens its permanent exhibition on this subject. A panel entitled "Labyrinth," introducing the animation, begins with the words "The entire history of Russia has been a search for freedom. Although Russian democracy was born before Russian autocracy, the country's path to freedom as the highest value turned out to be long and hard." The metaphor of a labyrinth framing disruptive political events presents Russia as overcoming a difficult journey from its freedom-based origins. The description of this journey ends with the claim "It was only in the 1990s that Russia at last found the path to liberation from its totalitarian past." Russia is thus portrayed as having emerged from its troubles to reach a new height in its progressive trajectory.

This portrayal of Russian history undoubtedly clashes with federal discourses of Russia as a state and nation always united in its successes and self-fulfillment. In sharp contrast also to the church-led depiction of the Romanovs as saints and national heroes, the center highlights a tension between the people as nation and all their rulers prior to Yeltsin. The center has been subject to vocal criticism by conservative public figures, most prominently by Nikita Mikhalkov, celebrated film

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director and president of the Russian Culture Foundation, an organization focused on cultural preservation. However, the potential for the populist tone of the center's narrative to challenge contemporary nation-building efforts is curtailed by its concluding narrative resolution. Here, the post-Soviet period becomes the first time when the Russian nation and state align. The center is at pains to show that its work does not concern Russia's present political direction. As a representative emphasizes, "We talk about the past, after all. If we talk about the present, in our educational programs, it's always about the theory. We do not carry out political activity, and we have to say this and emphasize it constantly" (Oleg Lutokhin, personal communication, May 23, 2018). Conspicuously absent from the chronological overview of national history in the center's museum is any assessment of the status of freedom in the actions of the state in the years since Yeltsin's presidency. The exhibition ends with footage of well-known public figures commenting on the permanent benefits of Yeltsin's reforms. Established by presidential decree and accountable to board members close to the federal authorities, the center clearly avoids criticism of the current administration. Operating in a context of repressive measures on dissenting actors, claims of political disengagement remove grounds for censure in an increasingly illiberal climate and enable the center's continued promotion of liberal values in line with its mandate to celebrate Yeltsin's legacy. As regards nation building, the center's narrative poses a seemingly audacious challenge to federal discourses that present an atemporal link between rulers and the nation. However, ultimately it reinforces the legitimacy of the post-Soviet state, arguably compromising its dedication to liberal values in the process.

In contrast to the state-aligned narratives of the diocese and the Yeltsin Center, a bottom-up, people-centered approach to constructing the nation emerges in the narratives of the Ekaterinburg History Museum, a more modestly sized and resourced institution. This museum seeks to contribute to a local and regional sense of place, as is made clear in its overall mission statement: "to study and popularize the history of Ekaterinburg, facilitating the consolidation of the city community and the development of regional identity" (Ekaterinburg History Museum, n.d.). Like other actors narrating the past, the museum's activities involve the interpretation of wider themes and events in Russian history. An emphasis on empathy with fellow residents facing the challenges of everyday life in different periods encourages the public to consider the nation's past from the perspective of values of individual freedom, appealing to the liberal side of the divide in visions of the nation in Ekaterinburg.

The museum director emphasizes the administration's efforts to present history in ways that inspire in visitors a sense of closeness with the past: "We work with microhistory … . This enables us to evaluate historical reality, historical processes, differently and make them more human, more on a level with us. Right?" (S. Kamensky, personal communication, June 13, 2018). One project under development that he describes will gather the testimonies of elderly residents and use these as a public memory resource for exploring the local Soviet experience. Through this type of activity, the museum adopts an approach seen in museums elsewhere of enriching public memory narratives with examples of vernacular recollections, developing its theme on everyday history by bringing unheard voices in the community into its narrative (Rowe, Wertsch, and Kosyaeva 2002). This follows a strategy of focusing on microlevel experiences rather than grand narratives about the past: "Personal themes and the most ordinary objects give the exhibitions a nonheroic, everyday dimension, while uncovering the history of the city, conveying the spirit and sense of bygone eras" (Ekaterinburg History Museum, n.d.). As the director clarifies in interview, "We specifically accentuate the topic of everyday people's lives, the topic of the everyday, because in our country there is always, very often an emphasis on the big events, the big dates, the big processes, the big characters" (S. Kamensky, personal communication, June 13, 2018). In a local context of prominent and conflicting grand narratives of the nation focused on exalted leaders, the museum thus seeks to guide its audience beyond a celebratory approach to the national past as that of the state.

A branch of the museum is dedicated to the local memory of victims of political repressions, in particular the thousands of political prisoners executed under Stalin at the 12th Kilometer site just

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outside Ekaterinburg. This area of its work builds on a long-running campaign led by the NGO Memorial to acknowledge this aspect of the city's place in national history. This campaign has represented the nation as a secular community of shared pain (Bogumił, Moran, and Harrowell 2015). The topic of Stalin's repressions has received ambivalent treatment in public discourse in recent years and remains controversial. While Putin opened space for some recognition of this past with the unveiling of a national monument in Moscow on the eve of the centenary (Ryan 2018), highlighting the human cost of Russia's achievements is understood by some actors to contradict the drive for patriotism (Goode 2020b). In Ekaterinburg, the Orthodox Church has sought to control discourse on the repressions, and their efforts successfully delayed the erection of a secular commemorative sculpture for over 25 years (Bogumił, Moran, and Harrowell 2015). The museum's focus on everyday experience rather than grand narratives of the state creates space for difficult aspects of Ekaterinburg's past to be conveyed as an exposition of local rather than national history, and thus perhaps it is less easily politicized. Throughout its exhibitions, the museum portrays the collective past as distinct from, and often at odds with, the trajectory of the state's strength and military achievements. While not explicitly oppositional, its constructions of the nation do not support the state's legitimacy. Instead, they promote a sense of a timeless community of experience of the state's actions, not always benign, and encourage a sense of identification with this community based on feelings of local solidarity. While lacking the support afforded to statist interpretations of Russian nationhood, evidence elsewhere of Russian patriotism disassociated from the state in vernacular narratives suggests that this approach may resonate with the public (Le Huérou 2015; Goode 2018).

The conservative-liberal divide is not specific to Ekaterinburg but has a long history in Russia that continues to shape debates on the nation's identity at the national level (Chebankova 2015). However, the symbolic resources of post-Soviet Ekaterinburg and their exploitation by powerful actors have embedded this divide in understandings of the city itself. The erection of the imposing Yeltsin Center building on a central embankment of the Iset' River opposite the Church on the Blood has given material form to the dynamics of contention over Ekaterinburg's place in the nation's past and future. Furthermore, this visual reminder of the clash of two locally rooted paths for Russia can be seen to add an indefinite question mark to the identity of the city and region. An installation by street artist Timofei Radya adorning a former factory building on the embankment in 2017–2020, re-erected by popular demand following the building's removal, captures this sentiment. In the place where three decades earlier a sign proclaimed, "Glory to Labor," it spells out three simple questions to passers-by across the water: "Who are we? Where are we from? Where are we going?" In rooting the nation in the city and region, nongovernmental actors in Ekaterinburg position themselves in a dynamic of intensified division between competing sociopolitical philosophies underpinning a key cleavage in local identity politics. By concretizing the nation around figures, sites, and events of local significance, they may give substance to federal discourses of patriotism. However, the visibility of local divisions over symbols and values of the nation also draws attention to the contradictions of Putin's generalist nation-building approach and opens space for bottom-up, place-based constructions of Russia as unconnected to the state.

Conclusion

Constructions of the nation vary not only in the attributes and boundaries that they claim for it but in the extent to which they support or complicate official nation-building efforts. While nationalism scholars have dedicated substantial debate to human agency at different levels in practices of constructing the nation, there has been little reflection on the potential for such practices to complicate governments' efforts to positively implicate the state in mass national identity. The discussion above has drawn attention to this aspect of agency in the discursive practice of nationalism, examining mesolevel narratives in two Russian cities.

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The cases explored in Kazan and Ekaterinburg provide an indicative snapshot of the importance of place in mesolevel constructions of the nation beyond the political sphere. In these examples, the nation is given meaning together with geographically linked subnational identities and in relation to place-specific identity cleavages. The actors examined have in common an orientation toward interests and sensitivities particular to their local audiences, and their narratives reflect an interest in positioning themselves in relation to these. In both these cases, nation construction is shaped by conflict over regional identity, which is particularly exposed in the local politics of these cities as regional capitals. In Kazan, constructions of the Russian nation account for the presence of competing ethnic identities in the city and region, while in Ekaterinburg the nation is seen to be rooted in competing local symbols and sites associated with liberal or conservative ideologies. Thus, it is not simply that constructions of the nation vary in content between locales across the state; they are steeped in a particular politics of place.

The analysis also highlights how nongovernmental actors' use of discursive resources linking identity at different scales, such as nesting, Othering, and local rooting, can render the nation meaningful and relevant in local terms. The selective and creative application of these discourses is one way in which these actors exercise agency in the reproduction of nationalism. Place-based agency at the mesolevel contributes to dynamics of contestation and complexity around nation building, since such acts of meaning making can highlight contradictions in federal narratives or cast doubt on the link between nation and state.

Finally, actors based in a single city come from different starting points in narrating the Russian nation. The nature of their support structures and mandates constrains and shapes their narratives. In Ekaterinburg, the political leverage and independent financial backing of both the Ekaterinburg Diocese and the Yeltsin Center have enabled them to widely promote political agendas that frame key divisions in understandings of the nation in the city. In Kazan, actors close to the regional authorities construct a symbiotic relationship between the continuity of different nations and remain silent on local tensions evident in narratives produced by activist organizations. Meanwhile, contributions by smaller actors in both cities give voice to countercurrents that shed light on local tensions around mainstream national identity narratives.

The year of the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and of controversial constitutional amendments saw Putin's popularity dip to unprecedented, low levels and brought new momentum to antigovernment protests (Levada Center 2021a).[5] These developments suggest an increasingly mobilizable tension between public imaginings of the nation and official discourses linking it to the regime and to Putin himself. Understanding the evolution of contemporary Russian nationalism requires greater attention to narratives and debates developing at the local level and their interaction with the broader context of national discourse. As this article has shown, attending to the dynamics of constructing the nation in places where local and regional history creates sensitivities around certain federal discourses can be particularly instructive. Research on the role of nonstate actors in nation building should also consider their diverse starting points and the different resources they bring to the process. While it lies beyond the scope of this study, attention to vernacular responses to place-based public narratives of the nation would further contribute to more fully apprehending the process of nation building in Russia. More broadly, the findings of this study show that nation building should not be understood as an isolated process of identity formation but as one that interacts with, shapes, and is shaped by other identity forming processes at different scales and with varying levels of resonance.

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Notes

1 *Tyubiteika* is a Tatar cap with national symbolic status.
2 *Sabbantui* is a festival celebrated by Tatar communities in Spring, traditionally in rural areas but now also in cities, to mark the start of the sowing season.
3 The final posts published on the Society's news page in 2013-14 included headlines such as "The Russian question in contemporary Tatarstan" and "The authorities of Tatarstan have practically prevented [the tradition of] epiphany dips" (Society for Russian Culture of the Republic of Tatarstan 2014).
4 A collaborative project between the church and the state, this network of centers aims to foster patriotism through engagement with national history using immersive, interactive multimedia formats.
5 A poll in January 2021 indicated public expectation of continued protests was at its highest level since 1998 (Levada Center 2021b).

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