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Exchange on David Laitin's *Identity in Formation*

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Introduction

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In 2018, David Laitin and Pål Kolstø engaged in a discussion at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Nationalities held at Columbia University, New York. The panel was a 20-year retrospective on *Identity in Formation: the Russian-speaking populations in the Near Abroad* (Laitin 1998).

In what follows, David Laitin evaluates his predictions against evidence that he amassed over the years and Pål Kolstø reacts. *Identity in Formation* offered a set of predictions about the linguistic assimilation of Russian-speakers into titular languages, loyalty to the new republics, nation-state formation, and the possibility of inter-ethnic violence. The picture appears to be favorable for Laitin's predictions, and in many instances new theoretical insights can be drawn from this exercise. Perhaps Russian-speakers have not fled Kazakhstan's nationalizing project at the pace Laitin anticipated, and Russian-speakers did not assimilate into an Estonian identity in a *cascade* fashion, but on the whole many of the predictions have stood the test of time. Kolstø agrees that when Laitin wrote the book in the mid-1990s, he could not have anticipated Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. And, while Kolstø evaluates Laitin's predictions positively, he suggests that Laitin's identity-change tipping model may not have been the one that was operative. Kolstø's evaluation emerges from what he sees as a conflation of "assimilation" with "integration" in *Identity in Formation* and, in his mind, problematic emphasis on *linguistic* assimilation over other dimensions. This disagreement over the definition of assimilation may underlie the divergent predictions between Laitin's argument and those of other scholars. Laitin views assimilation as a generational process, aligning with Karl Deutsch's perspective, which sees nationality as emerging from a "wide complementarity of communication" (Deutsch 1953, 97), while Kolstø understands assimilation as an individual-level identity shift, or what Ernest Renan would call a change in one's "daily plebiscite" (Renan 1995 [1882], 154).

We are now 27 years since the publication of *Identity in Formation*. In light of the publication of this exchange in *Nationalities Papers*, David Laitin agreed to add a newly drafted *coda*, which you can find below Pål Kolstø's reaction, incorporating updates of his predictions for assimilation and exit in the Baltics and Kazakhstan, and reflections on both civil strife in Ukraine and Russia's full scale invasion in 2022.

Identity in Formation: a 20-year retrospective

David D. Laitin, Stanford University

The spiraling collapse of the Soviet Union from 1989-1991 constituted a double cataclysm for Russian-speakers in the fourteen non-Russian Union Republics that became independent states. First, they faced language laws written by the titular majorities that challenged the assumed rights of

Russians to remain monolingual. Second, independence meant that they were now a diaspora, with their homeland across an international border. *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Laitin 1998) – relying on rational choice models, survey research, experimental psychological linguistics, ethnography, and the expertise of a wide community of area experts (Jerry Hough, Timothy Colton, Mikhail Guboglo, Aksel Kirch, Marika Kirch, Tarmo Tuisk) and research assistants who were virtual collaborators (Dominique Arel, Bhavna Dave, and Vello Pettai) – analyzed the reactions of this diaspora to the double cataclysm.

In the preface, I admitted that “it would be the height of folly to make predictions about [the] future [of the post-Soviet states] on the basis of early trends. Present outcomes are too unstable” (Laitin 1998, x).¹ Nonetheless, the book extrapolated from those early trends to offer a set of predictions about assimilation (of Russian-speakers into titulars), loyalty to the new republics, nation-state formation, and the possibility of inter-ethnic violence.

Identity in Formation won awards from committees of Soviet area experts (the Vucinich Book Prize), political theory (the APSA David Easton Award), and comparative politics (the APSA Gregory Luebbert Award). It has been cited in 1,637 academic publications (Google Scholar). But critics abounded. Experts were appalled by the reduction of culture to simple mechanics (Bonnard 2013, Tabuns 2005, Ponarin 2000), by the bunching of a highly differentiated set of Russian-speakers into a single category (Poppe and Hagendoorn 2001), and by the focus on language as the principal component of culture (Fournier 2002). And my interpretation of early trends was seen as flawed, blind to the emerging power of Russians in Estonia and equally blind to the peaceful merging of identities in Ukraine (Ponarin 2000).

Twenty years post publication is an ideal moment to reflect on the “height of folly” predictions made in *Identity in Formation* and in the theoretical model that served as the foundation for the empirical analysis. Here I will evaluate the major claims in the book to see how they look today. I enumerate them below:

1. The “Russian-speaking population” is an emergent identity among the “beached diaspora” made up of Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles, and Jews living in the non-Russian nationalizing states of the former Soviet Union.
2. Russian nationalism in Russia is likely to diverge from the nationalism of the Russian-speakers in the Near Abroad, each connecting to different threads of historical experience and a different relationship with the Orthodox Church.
3. The Russian-speakers in the Baltics would face incentives to assimilate into the titular culture, and ultimately this would cascade towards a nation state with a common Estonian/Latvian identity.
4. The Russian-speakers in Kazakhstan (including both ethnic Slavs and Russian-speaking Kazakhs) would exit and establish themselves as citizens of the Russian Federation.
5. The Russian-speakers in Ukraine will use voice to demand cultural autonomy and therefore there will be language maintenance across generations and a bi-cultural state.
6. As long as Russia could neither commit nor ignore the rights of its “co-fatherlanders” in the Near Abroad, the likelihood of ethnic warfare between titulars and Russians would be minimal.

1. The Russian-speaking population as an emergent identity

In *Identity in Formation* (chap. 10), through the use of content analysis from the press in the four republics, I inferred the emergence of a conglomerate identity, the “Russian-speaking population.” The content analysis revealed a plethora of designations for the non-titular populations. The titular press typically referred to them as negations: the unrooted (nekorennye); people without a country (apatridy); foreigners (inorodtsy); foreign speakers (inoiazychnye); denationalized (denatsionalizirovannye); non-citizens (negrzhzdane); not-from-Russia Russians (nerossiiskie russkie); illegals (nelegal’nye emigranty); and several other epithets as well, reaching down to damned

Russians (proklatye russkie), and Russian shit (russkoe govno). Also in the titular arsenal were colonist (kolonisty), occupiers (okkupanty), and migrants (migranty).

The non-titulars were, in the face of the double cataclysm, equally experimental in naming themselves. They were co-fatherlanders (sootechestvenniki) with those of the Russian Federation; Slavs; members of the Russian state (rossiiskie or rossiiane); ethnic Russians (russkie); Soviets; minorities; and Cossacks (which President Yeltsin expanded as a new cultural-ethnic social formation [kul'turno-etnicheskaja obshchnost']). All of these designations hardly captured the deep common social and cultural challenge faced by these newly realized minorities. And the designation "Russian-speaking population," a term basically invented in 1989, was widely adopted by groups of Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Belarusians, Jews, and titulars who had become Russified in the Soviet era.

What to make of this content analysis? I was careful to backtrack on a claim I made in an earlier publication that this category of Russian-speaking was a nationality designation. My data only allowed me to portray it as a useful label to categorize a population (the difference between *natsional'nost'* and *naselenie*). But I portrayed it as a powerful symbolic tool for ethnic entrepreneurs to unify the non-titulars (and Russified titulars) into a political project to assert a common response to the nationalizing projects of those who inherited the post-Soviet Union Republics.

My claims about this identity shift met with substantial disbelief among area researchers. Poppe and Hagendoorn (2001, 58) argued that my categorization of a Russian-speaking population is not "accurate": "Whereas the use of this label may serve as a simple means to generalize 'the other' from the titular perspective, the question remains whether different non-titular ethnic groups speaking the Russian language (e.g. Jews, Gypsies, Belarusians and Russians in Ukraine) consider *themselves* as one group. Moreover, the label 'Russian-speaking population' is ambiguous in those republics where a considerable number of titulars speak Russian as their first language." This underestimates the "variety within Russian communities." Equally critical, Fournier (2002, 415, 430) argued that while there might be a fusion of the Russian-speaking Ukrainians and Ukrainian Russians, there is also a disjunction, one that my categorization missed. Russian and Ukrainian Russophones, she pointed out, typically do not share a common culture: "their identities [have] different configurations."

Moreover, the evidence is mixed as to the staying power of this conglomerate identity in the past twenty years. Identity categories remain fluid. In 2017, Bhavna Dave reported (in a personal communication) that Kazakhstan and Kazakhstani are still tinkering with the ethnic-civic debate: "They need to keep pedaling, reinventing the 'national' vs 'soviet' (kazakh vs kazakhstani) debate, inventing new terms, pseudo-ideologies to continue to mobilize support. They are officially talking about multilingualism – 'trinity of languages' with English added. It will turn into a quartet in a few years with Chinese added! 'Eurasianism', and not 'Russian-speaking identity/nationality' is now the dominant term." Similarly, in a private communication, Volodymyr Kulyk insisted that "the error in *Identity in Formation* was in relying on elite media rather than self-identifications of ordinary people...if Laitin did that, he would not have found [at least in Ukraine] such an identity. The Ukrainians (even Russian-speaking) identified as national Ukrainians; the Russians with their localities (Crimea, Donetsk)."

However, as I pointed out in the book, the category of "Russian-speaking" has become such a cliché that it remains almost unnoticed in its ubiquity. Social commentators a quarter-century after the second cataclysm still have no other way to categorize this admittedly diverse population. Katja Koort, in *World Affairs* in 2014, writes: "more than three hundred thousand Russian-speaking people (including Ukrainians, Belarusians, and others) are living in Estonia." (Koort 2014, 68). In a study of internet posts on the Maidan in three languages from Ukraine, Etling (2014) writes that his "early results point towards more support among *Russian-speaking Ukrainians* for the protests than the Russian government and mainstream media claim." The all-Ukrainian non-governmental organization "Human Rights Public Movement 'Russian-speaking Ukraine'" (Russian: Всеукраїнська громадська організація «Правозащитное

общественное движение «Русскоязычная Украина») was founded on March 1, 2008 in [Severodonetsk](#), in the Luhansk region, during the second all-ukrainian congress of deputies of all-level councils, and registered on 10 August 2009 by the Ministry of Justice (Kyiv).²

I invite regional experts to replicate the content analysis performed in *Identity in Formation*, but now using social media and modern forms of text scraping, to provide a quarter-century report on the cultural and political identities of the Russified populations in the former Soviet republics. It may be that my forecasts were incorrect and that the strategies of the titular elites to segment the minority populations have been successful, so that now local identities (Kulyk) or different legal statuses (Pettai and Hallik 2002) predominate. But the attractiveness of the label suggests strongly that “Russian-speaking” has a latent power to mobilize political support (albeit with different coalitions in different republics) as a conglomerate identity.

2. Russian nationalism in Russia is likely to diverge from the nationalism of Russian-speakers in the Near Abroad

An implication of my claim of an emergent Russian-speaking identity (as I draw in chapter 11) is that we should observe different themes in the articulation of nationalism in Russia as compared to those in the titular republics. To be sure, there is no historically coherent expression of Russian nationalism as a political project.³ But in the 19th century, two forms of nationalism emerged under conditions of economic backwardness combined with an Orthodox authoritarian tradition. The first (and emphasized by Greenfeld (1990) in her notion of *ressentiment*) was to emphasize that the Russian “soul” was deep and superior to the shallow values of (the more developed) West. Here religion becomes the glue that holds this nation together, as in Tsar Nicholas I’s “Official Nationality” proclamation declaring Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality as the three principles of his governing doctrine. As Dostoyevsky wrote, “he who is not Orthodox cannot be Russian” (quoted in Dinello, 1994, 198). The second strand emerged as a response to the incomplete rationalization of the Russian language to the imperial periphery, and the distinction between those who shared the core nationality (*russkii*) and those who were subjects of the empire (*rossiiskie*).⁴ Russians who saw themselves as *rossiiskie* were internationalists, and this became the dominant theme of the Bolsheviks (at least until World War II) who wavered between discrediting nationality and heralding a “Soviet” national project (in which Russians were the elder brothers and Russian the language of internationality communication).

Examining these two strands, I speculated that in the wake of the Soviet collapse, there would be a resurgence of the Orthodox national tradition in the Russian Federation. Indeed, as I was researching my book, Orthodox imagery was becoming quite fashionable in Russian society. However, I inferred that in the near abroad, because Russians (at least in the Baltics and Kazakhstan) had been thrown into the same boat with non-Orthodox Russian-speakers, it would be inconvenient for political entrepreneurs representing them to rely on religious symbols to build political coalitions. Here the internationalist strain of Russian nationalism would become dominant. In practical terms, as I observed the scene post-collapse, Russian nationalism in Russia was consumed by the debate over Russia’s future role as a great power; meanwhile Russian nationalism in the near abroad was consumed by the debate as to whether the much-heralded “friendship of nations” (*druzhba narodov*) could be sustained.

While the discourse analysis presented in chapter 11 differentiated the two nationalist strands with their different emphases in the near abroad as compared to Russia, an examination of the survey data I collected with Jerry Hough provided no support for my inferences. There was no evidence of greater attachment to Orthodoxy in Russia in comparison with Russians living in the four republics of my study. Moreover, there was only weak support for Russians in Russia holding to a “Russian” identity with Russians in the near abroad holding a “Soviet” identity. I could not determine whether my inferences were incorrect, or whether it would take more time for these differences to appear.

Question	Russians in RF	Russian-speakers in Estonia
Important in life: Religion		
Very or Rather	41.8	33.4
Not very or not at all	52.9	64.8
Tradition is Important – that those who follow should be:		
Very much to somewhat like me	68.2	49.9
A little or not like me	14.4	47.8
Trust in people of another nationality		
Completely or Somewhat	36.7	47.7
Not very much or not at all	50.1	40.3

Evidence from the World Values Study (World Values Study Wave 6, 2010-2014), however, provides new support for my inference. Comparing self-declared Russians in Russia and in Estonia on questions on the importance of religion, Russians living in the Russian Federation were 8.4% more likely to report that it is “very” or “rather” important, and 11.9% less likely to say “not very” or “not at all” important. On a measure of exclusiveness, the WVS asks if those who follow my traditions should be “very much” or “somewhat” like me. Russian respondents in the Russian Federation were 18.3% more likely to agree; and 33.4% less likely to want to share tradition with those who were “only a little” or “not” like me. And on the question of whether respondents trust folk from a different nationality, Russians from the Russian Federation were 11% less likely to agree, and 9.8% more likely to disagree. I interpret these results (albeit from only one titular republic) to reveal a more internationalist and secular version of these social identities in Estonia, and a more Orthodox and exclusive social identity in Russia. Further research is obviously needed to corroborate this trend.

3. Russian-speakers in the Baltics would face incentives to assimilate into the titular culture

The imperial and Soviet states permitted, even encouraged, professional mobility of Baltic elites within their republics; and given the economic dynamism of the Baltic states, with highly educated populations, those titular elites that accommodated to Russian hegemony could garner jobs in the arts, the sciences, and in management in their own republics, with little need (and no encouragement) to explore career success in St. Petersburg (Leningrad) or Moscow. I called this the integralist pattern in Russian/Soviet expansion. Those Balts who were active Bolsheviks, once they took responsible positions in the homeland of their ancestors, acquired facility in Russian, but operated politically and professionally in the titular languages. Thus at the time of republican restoration and the passage of the new language laws, virtually all Balts accepted (and rejoiced in) the nationalizing program. And given the claim of illegal Soviet incorporation, the Russian-speaking population that moved to the Baltics after World War II (almost none of whom spoke Estonian or Latvian) were denied citizenship. In what I pictured as Kafkaesque treatment (as in Joseph K. in *The Trial*), the Russian-speaking populations were left in legal limbo, insecure with their pensions and passports with their dignity challenged.

What could they do? Exit to Russia was not attractive. I overheard many Russian-speakers in the telephone center in Narva, where I did the fieldwork for this study, begging (distant) relatives to take them in, but to little avail. Across the Narva River, Estonian Russians could see the dismal poverty in the neighboring town of Ivangorod, hardly a place to resettle. And Baltic Russians had implicit property rights to their Soviet-era apartments. A federal solution with Russian and Baltic zones was

demographically impossible given the overlapping populations in Latvia; but possible with an autonomous region in northeast Estonia. Yet especially in Estonia, the titular elites were resolute in dropping Russian from their (children’s) language repertoires, and made sure that for jobs and university training, the titular language was a *sine qua non*. Federalism was not an option for the Russian-speakers.

An attractive alternative for the Russian-speakers was assimilation. For one, in an experimental test, they demonstrated high respect for co-ethnics who had facility in the titular language (Laitin 1998, 235).⁵ Also, there were excellent job opportunities for Russians in the expanding Baltic economies. These factors help explain why Russian-speaking respondents from the two Baltic states in my high-n surveys had the highest scores on the index for openness to assimilation (Laitin 1998, 252). With these opportunities, the third option (exit through emigration) was less attractive.

Regional experts were aghast (and this before my fieldwork) when I proposed from a game theoretic model as to why we should expect Russians to become Estonians and Latvians more or less as Andalusians became Catalans in Catalonia and Russians became New Yorkers on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Indeed, the game model predicted a slow trend for perhaps a generation, and then an assimilationist cascade.⁶ However, and even after my fieldwork, I had only attitudes towards assimilation as evidence, but hardly any examples of actual assimilation in real life.

After twenty years, what does the evidence reveal? Preliminary evidence analyzed by Koort (2014) shows that twenty-one percent of non-ethnic Estonians have been successfully integrated. This group comprises the younger people who were born and educated in Estonia. They have a good command of Estonian and they can cope economically. Most of them are Estonian citizens and consider themselves part of the Estonian community. They trust the Estonian state and authorities, live and work in an Estonian-speaking environment, and follow Estonian media and prefer it to Russian channels. They live in Tallinn and other larger cities, and are underrepresented in Ida-Virumaa County in the northeast, where Russian-speakers predominate.

All Estonia				
	Mother Tongue	Total Students	Estonian m.i.	% Estonian m.i.
All levels	Estonian	104,177	103,758	99.6
	Russian	35,071	12,802	36.5
Grades 1–3	Estonian	30,451	30,302	99.5
	Russian	10,685	3,085	28.9
Grades 10–12	Estonian	20,335	20,231	99.5
	Russian	5,465	4,671	85.5
Ida-Virumaa				
All levels	Estonian	2,553	2,495	97.7
	Russian	11,744	3,600	30.7
Grades 1–3	Estonian	660	642	97.3
	Russian	3,474	830	23.9
Grades 10–12	Estonian	497	487	98.0
	Russian	1,696	1,541	90.9

Note for publication in 2025: the url with these data is unavailable. Very similar data for the year 2016 are archived at https://andmed.stat.ee/en/stat/Lepetatud_tabelid__Eri-valdkonnad.%20Arhiiv__loimumine/HT140/table/tableViewLayout2

Data from the Estonian Ministry of Education show similarly a rather smooth transition to Estonian for non-titular youth and no resistance from their parents. At the moment of restored independence, virtually no Russian-speakers were being educated in Estonian as a medium of instruction. The recent data show that in grades 1-3, 28.9% of Russian mother-tongue students in Estonia (and 23.9% in Ida-Virumaa, where about 95% of the population is Russian mother-tongue) are learning *in* Estonian. At the higher levels (10-12) virtually all Russian speakers, whether from Ida-Virumaa or elsewhere, are exposed to Estonian medium of instruction. This is certainly a strong indicator of linguistic assimilation, as the model predicted.

In interpreting these data, Aksel Kirch, Marika Kirch, and Tarmo Tuisk (personal communication) write that since 2011, all state and municipal gymnasiums which were teaching solely in the Russian medium now must teach 60% of subjects in Estonian and 40% in Russian. They infer that Statistics Estonia (supplier of these data) considers these Estonian medium schools. In addition, there is a strong step-by-step immersion in many Russian language schools during grades 4-9, and the idea of it is to prepare Russian-speakers at minimum for these 60/40 gymnasiums. If their Estonian language skills are not sufficient for gymnasium, the students are typically tracked into vocational schools or directly into the work force, as there are no state schools at that level operating solely through the Russian medium. Importantly, this educational rationalization in Estonian has not met with resistance. The Integration Monitoring Study of 2011 showed that 32% of Russian mother-tongue respondents prefer their children to have their education in the Estonian language and another 25% prefer schools with (Estonian) language immersion programs. That leaves some 37% of Russian-speaking parents who prefer their children learning in Russian schools. Inter-generationally, this is approaching a language cascade.

Data from Latvia tell a similar story. Bonnard (2013) describes a dual dynamic: non-Russian minorities adopting Russian as a mother tongue (this the emergence of a trans-ethnic Russian-speaking minority); but a slow progression of all minorities moving toward Latvian as their mother tongue. Bonnard (2013, 286) calls this a “double melting pot”. Indeed, in the 2000 census, there were 1.8% more Latvian nationals by declaration than in the registry data, and -0.6% fewer Russians. Especially among the young, Bonnard writes (2013, 280-81), “The slight hold of origin on the feeling of ethnicity facilitates trajectories of assimilation.” In the choice of ethnicity of children of mixed Russian-Latvian marriages from 1989 to 1998, there was a 27.1% increase in declaring the child as Latvian (from 61.3% to 88.4%). In 1960, 57% of the children in Russo-Latvian marriages classified themselves as Latvian on their passports. In 1989, this reached 69.8%. Even for Russian and non-Russian/non-Latvian marriages, where children were typically registered as Russian, there is now a trend for classifying the kids as Latvian (2013, 284). Bonnard (despite his vigorous objections to my forecasts) identifies both the emergence of a latent Russian-speaking identity and the creeping success of a Latvian assimilationist project.

In the final analysis, I did not discount the possibility of the formation of a Russian-speaking *nationality* as a possible counter-hegemony to the Baltic nationalizing projects. But I thought the powerful incentives for the fulfillment, through the cumulative assimilation of Russian-speakers into Balts, of both an Estonian and a Latvian nation-state in the model of 3rd Republic France (Weber 1976), would predominate.

Missing, however, from the tipping model and my political analysis was the implication of future EU membership for the Baltic States. This gave young Russian-speaking Balts incentive to learn enough of the titular language to get citizenship and then emigrate to the EU job market (learning English or German, with their rudimentary Estonian or Latvian falling into desuetude). To some degree, and this needs to be examined empirically, this would amplify the assimilationist logic. Those who remain in the Baltics were likely to be those most comfortable in Estonian and Latvian. The resulting selection dynamic would exaggerate the success of my assimilationist prediction, but with a different mechanism.

4. Russian-speakers in Kazakhstan would exit and establish themselves as citizens of the Russian Federation

Kazakhstan, as with the other Central Asian Republics, was incorporated as a colonial territory, more or less like Algeria into France. In the wake of the double cataclysm, non-Kazakh Russian-speakers, as confirmed by the contempt for Russians performing as Kazakh speakers in the matched guise experiment (comparing respect scores for the same voice of a Russian speaking in Russian compared to speaking in Kazakh in Laitin 1998, 235), could not even dream of assimilating into a Kazakh nationality. Meanwhile, since nearly all the elite Kazakhstanis were Russian-speakers (many of whom had intergenerationally lost facility in Kazakh), Kazakhstani elites were divided among themselves whether to promote a culturally nationalizing program. Thus, as a prudent nationalist, President Nazarbaev pressed for a civic agenda, where both languages would have their official roles. He maintained publication of the two state newspapers, one in Russian and the other in Kazakh, whose origins went back to the early 20th century (Abishev et al. 2024). The crucial question for the Russian-speaking technical experts (of both nationalities) in the oil and missile industries was whether Nazarbaev (and his successors) could stave off a second-generation of Kazakh leaders with nationalizing goals. Already in the early 1990s, enormous investments in new mosques gave the impression of a cultural revival. Epithets for Russian-speaking Kazakhs – such as being called *mankurty* (zombies) – were also evident. And Russians watched carefully, fearing the fate of the *pieds noirs* in Algeria, many with their suitcases packed, ready to find a new home in their diasporic homeland. I therefore predicted a reasonably stable Russian and Russian-speaking Kazakh cosmopolitan elite living tentatively in Kazakhstan, but ever ready to emigrate.

My prediction that the Russians would begin to “pack their suitcases” when they foresaw a nationalizing project is only partially right. From a height of 42.7% of Russians in Kazakhstan in the 1959 census, it dropped to 29.9% in 1999, reflecting the results of a near decade of republican independence. In the latest ethnic demographic data of 2014 (as was reported under “Ethnic Demography of Kazakhstan” in Wikipedia on April 8, 2025), this figure of Russians (as an ethnic group) in Kazakhstan is down to 21.5%. To be sure, there is no evidence of political marginalization of Russified Kazakh intellectuals. Nor has emigration of Russians been of the cascade quality. But as I wrote, this may well be because of the technical expertise required for the oil boom, and the prosperity that has followed. Indeed, in 1990 Kazakhstan’s GDP was \$26.93 billion, behind Ukraine and about equal with Uzbekistan. But in 2013 it reached US\$236.6 billion, well richer than Ukraine and Uzbekistan. Although there has been a retraction with a drop to US\$133.7 billion in 2015, the World Bank classifies it as an upper-middle-income country with GDP per capita of nearly US\$10.5 thousand. Wealth and autocratic rule have permitted Nazarbaev to successfully resist a radical Kazakh nationalist project and Salafi fanaticism, factors that would have accelerated the slow demographic disappearance of ethnic Russians into a cascade.

5. Ukraine – voice dominates exit and language maintenance across generations

Ukrainians in both imperial and Soviet times had the privilege of what I dubbed “most favored lord” status. Ambitious titular elites were able, with minimal transition costs, to cultivate career ambitions anywhere in the Soviet Union. In the imperial era many Ukrainian parvenus were able to procure noble status from the tsar. By the later Stalinist era (1939–1953), there was mass famine and repression, with Ukrainians absent from the Politburo. But by the mid-1950s, Ukrainians became “junior elder brothers” compared to the lesser nationalities and got more top positions in all republics than any other non-Russian nationality. The Kuban region of Russia and the south and east oblasts of Ukraine were populated by mixed populations based on language (*rodnoi yazyk*) and nationality. While Besançon (1978) viewed Soviet Ukraine in terms of a province analogous to those in the Austrian empire, I characterized it as closer to the Languedoc region in France with the possibility of a common Slavic-based cosmopolitan identity (Weber 1976).

Unlike Languedoc, however, Ukrainian peasants were not transformed into Russians. Given the policies of what Martin (2001) dubbed “the affirmative action empire,” many expected a powerful and successful rationalization of Ukrainian culture in Ukraine. In Martin’s analysis of Soviet nationality policy, Galicia (in Western Ukraine) would be the “Piedmont” for the western borderlands that would bring cultural unity to the region. As a Union Republic, Ukraine’s national narrative persisted through the entire Soviet period. And in line with prediction (and supported by field notes collected by Dominique Arel), the post-independence Kyiv government pushed the Galician historical narrative celebrating the “heroism” of the ultra-nationalist and anti-Soviet Ukrainian insurgency in World War II. In terms of language, Ukrainian school authorities worked to rid the national language of Russian influences that were imparted in the 1930s. With a strong national narrative and only minimal costs for Russians to learn Ukrainian, assimilation of Russian-speakers into a Ukrainian-speaking nationality was therefore in the cards.

Nonetheless I did not foresee success of the Piedmont strategy. In the Hirschman trichotomy, for Russian-speaking Ukrainians, exit was unattractive to a crumbling Russia and complex to an attractive Europe; and loyalty to the nationalizing project was seen as useless. In the matched guise experiment, on average, Russians downgraded fellow Russians somewhat for speaking in Ukrainian compared to speaking in Russian. Why, one Russian-speaker from Kyiv asked me, should our children read Pushkin in Ukrainian? As the remaining alternative, voice was the preferred option. I therefore foresaw a political backlash in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine whose Russian-speakers (both Russian and Ukrainian in declared nationality) were pressing for a political bargain (and this is the voice) in which they would commit to loyalty to the Ukrainian state in return for cultural (and linguistic) autonomy in their regions. The west would be Ukrainian in language; the east and southeast Russian; and Kyiv would be (as with Brussels in the Belgian analogy I offered) a bi-lingual city. Consociation rather than rationalization in Ukrainian was my predicted outcome. The Party of Regions, strongest in the east and south, emphasized the rights of Russian-speakers in Ukraine, and supported a form of federalism. Its government passed the 2012 language law granting Russian regional status, and this was a step in favor of the Belgian model. Strong popular rejection of Ukraine as a unitary state in polls conducted in the Donbas in 2014 (Giuliano 2018, 167) reflected a mass base for a federalized, or at least decentralized state.

Although the Brussels model did not transpire, nor did the evolutionary progress of the Ukrainian national project, at least as foreseen by Ponarin (2000). In part, this was due to President Victor Yushchenko’s contempt (along with many of the Kyiv protesters in the Orange Revolution and later in Maidan Square) for the eastern voters and the subsequent parliamentary vote against the 2012 language compromise. This played a role in activating an insurgency in the Donbas leading to declarations of sovereignty by the Peoples’ Republic of Donetsk and the Peoples’ Republic of Luhansk, in accord with the views of a significant minority of the region’s population (Giuliano, 2018). But the Russian invasion of the Crimea, its inhuman role in the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, and its duplicitous role in fomenting the violence in the Donbas, militarized an already tense relationship between Ukraine’s regions. In view of the substantial constituency against the Ukrainian nationalizing project in Donbas, my prediction that that Russian-speakers in the eastern region would not assimilate into Ukrainian-speakers was on the mark.

However, upsetting my prediction, a non-peaceful merging toward a common Ukrainian identity may now be taking place, as suggested by a set of surveys conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology spanning 2012–2017. In the latest survey, well after the military occupation of Crimea and the onset of war in the Donbas (though lacking data from the war zones), the data reveal a two-step process from respondents seeing themselves as Russian/Ukrainian hybrids to unequivocal Ukrainians. The resolute abandonment of Russian ethnic and linguistic identities, even in the east, “can be viewed as the more or less conscious rejection of Moscow’s claim to ‘protect’ them, in stronger words, the refusal to identify with the entity they came to perceive as the enemy.” In consequence, support for a Ukrainian nationalizing project is growing (Kulyk 2018, 134–5).⁷

The war in the Donbas speaks to my final prediction.

6. As long as Russia could neither commit nor ignore the rights of its “co-fatherlanders” in the Near Abroad, the likelihood of ethnic warfare between titulars and Russians would be minimal

Extending my analysis of national identities, and relying on Brubaker’s (1995) framework, I sought to reckon the possibility of ethnic violence in the newly independent republics. Brubaker portrayed the post-Soviet world analogous to the structure of ethnic conflict in the interwar years in Eastern Europe. This structure was a “triadic configuration” among “national minorities” (e.g. Germans in the Sudetenland), nationalizing states (e.g. Czechoslovakia), and “external national homelands” (e.g. Germany). To the extent that the government of the national homeland seeks to protect its ethnic kin from the nationalizing impulses of the state housing the national minority, the possibility of civil war (induced by the national minority against the nationalizing state) and interstate war (between the national homeland and the nationalizing state) is ever present.

Van Houten (1998) formalized Brubaker’s framework and specified the parameter space in which ethnic violence was likely. His strategic analysis pointed to the degree of capacity and interest in the fate of the national minority by its national homeland. On the one hand, the higher the interest, the more emboldened the minority will be to initiate violence, create martyrs, and beg for military support from their putative homeland. On the other hand, the lower the interest, the more emboldened the nationalizing state will be to repress the national minority, inducing them to insurgency. Consequently, according to van Houten’s model, if the government of the national homeland takes a middle path between solid support and complete indifference to their ethnic brethren now living in nationalizing states, it has, according to this logic, done its best to guarantee peace.

Relying on this model, and noting that (as of my writing in 1998) Russia remained too weak to credibly commit to support its “co-fatherlanders” in the near abroad should they seek to fight for autonomy, and the nationalizing states were too constrained against minority repression by pressures from European institutions that they hoped to join, I foresaw no uprising by the Russian-speaking populations.

Indeed, the Russian Federation sent mixed signals to their “co-fatherlanders” in the near abroad. In the summer of 1992, Andrei Kozyrev, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, emphasized diplomatic resolution to all issues involving Russian minority populations in the former Union Republics. But at the same time, the Ministry of Defense was drafting a new military doctrine with protection of Russians living abroad as a principal justification for military action. In light of these contradictory signals, neither the titulars nor the Russian minorities had sufficient surety about Russia’s likely response to aggress upon the other. In light of this analysis, and because the parameter space specified by van Houten was peaceful (ambiguous signals from Moscow; low repression by the nationalizing states), I foresaw only a low probability of Russian troops moving into the republics of the near abroad to protect or incorporate their co-fatherlanders in a way similar to the German march into the Sudetenland in 1938.

Subsequent to publication of *Identity in Formation*, two factors pushed the variables in van Houten’s model in opposite directions. In Estonia and Latvia, NATO membership, while it increased the costs to Russia of attack, by its security guarantee decreased the incentives of the Baltic States to accommodate Russian-speakers. However, the prospect of (and eventual success in attaining) European Union membership put the Baltic states in a regulatory regime that demanded minority protections.⁸ Moreover, as mentioned earlier, EU membership (after a while) permitted all Estonian and Latvian citizens (with increasing number of Russian-speakers qualifying) to live and work in Western Europe. This opened up vast opportunities for the Russian-speaking minorities. And so, greater protection from an attack by Russia, greater minority protection in the Baltic States, and a vastly expanded labor market for all Baltic citizens have kept the Baltic States in the safe zone of the parameter space.

Ukraine tells us a different story. In the hope of following the Baltic States on the route to Western Europe, and pushed by popular mobilization in Kyiv, the interests of eastern Ukrainian

citizens were discredited. Russian media (fully available in eastern Ukraine) called this everything from minority repression to fascism. The latent Russian nationalism in this region (in part articulated by the Party of the Regions) was aroused. Meanwhile, after Russia's bungled invasion of Georgia, President Putin put enormous effort in rebuilding the Russian Federal army into a modern force. This gave him the interest and capability – after showing his cards in Crimea – to incite his co-fatherlanders in the Donbas to rebel.⁹ And because I did not predict a civil war in Ukraine, I did not model how Russian duplicity would help to unite Ukrainians from east and west.

In sum, although I did not foresee war in Ukraine, the van Houten model, with the parameter shifts, correctly pointed to the conditions that would threaten inter-nationality peace.

Conclusion

As with Brutus, I did not write this retrospective to praise a book I wrote twenty years ago. But unlike Brutus, I have no intention of burying it. My goal is to induce the new generation of post-Soviet studies and students of nationalism to replicate more fully the tests I conducted in the 1990s, better to understand the new challenges faced by contemporary nation-states in incorporating their minorities.

Discussing David Laitin's book *Identity in Formation*

Pål Kolstø, University of Oslo

It is often said that social scientists must make a choice between rigour and richness in their analyses, but David Laitin aimed at, and to a considerable degree achieved, a felicitous combination of both. His basic framework is a formal rational choice model, focusing on how people make strategic choices in their lives, followed by four ethnographic studies, and four quantitative surveys of four post-Soviet states. This triangulation provides a robust analysis: basically, the same patterns and trends emerge through different methods and approaches. Finally, his book builds on a comprehensive reading of secondary literature, ensuring that Laitin, who was a newcomer to the study of Soviet nationality questions when he started this book, did not reinvent the wheel, but was building cumulatively on previous research.

David Laitin's research concerns questions of identity change in circumstances of political upheaval and nationalist mobilization. In *Nations and Nationalism*, Ernest Gellner discussed how ambitious and resourceful members of minority populations in larger conglomerate states – what Gellner called Ruritarians in Megalomania – could choose between two strategies. First, they could try to adapt maximally to the high culture in Megalomania and attempt to compete with the scions of the majority nationality. Alternatively, they could try to turn their own Ruritanian idiom into the standard language of a new secessionist state – a Ruritania – where they would be the uncontested elite.

When secessionist nationalism prevailed over assimilation in the Soviet Union, the tables were suddenly turned on the majority population. The Megalomanians – the ethnic Russians – had become minorities in someone else's nationalizing states. At the time, 25 million ethnic Russians, in addition to several million linguistically Russified non-Russians, lived outside the Russian Federation in non-Russian successor states, and Laitin asked the intriguing question: Can the sociolinguistic processes so elegantly described by Gellner be reversed? In other words, can former Megalomanians be turned into Ruritarians – can the local Russians assimilate into the respective titular cultures in the non-Russian Soviet successor states? At the time, when Laitin started his book project, to many people the very question seemed preposterous: after all, ethnic identities had been formalized and deeply entrenched in the minds of the Soviet citizenry. However, as we all know, cultural identities are malleable – we left primordialism behind long ago – and, therefore, of course, there is no intrinsic reason why such shifts should not be possible.

Laitin explores these dynamics in four states: Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, where the preconditions for such identity shifts are very different. One important difference is the hierarchical relationships between the various linguistic cultures. In Kazakhstan, Kazakh culture has lower prestige than Russian, even among many Kazakhs, and the chances that Russians will assimilate into Kazakh culture are extremely small, he found. In Ukraine, the cultural and linguistic distance between Russians and the titulars is very short, so it should be quite easy for Russians to switch. However, other circumstances make this doubtful: not only the local ethnic Russian population, but millions of ethnic Ukrainians have Russian as their first language, which complicates cultural homogenization. The larger the minority culture is in a country, the easier it is to hold on to it.

Finally, in the Baltic states, the titular cultures enjoy high prestige. Even if the linguistic and cultural distance between Russians and titulars is relatively large, Laitin viewed assimilation as not only possible, but quite likely. That was far from obvious when the book was written, but now, 20 years on, the trend Laitin identified in the Baltics seems quite strong.

In Kazakhstan his basic framework of analysis appears vindicated. For Kazakhstan, he predicted a mass exodus of Russians to Russia at a time when such large-scale outmigration had taken place in other Central Asian republics, but in Kazakhstan the size of the Slavic population went down very slowly. It seems that while many Russians did indeed leave for Russia also from Kazakhstan, quite a few Slavs who decided that they had no future in Central Asian states further South relocated to Kazakhstan as a halfway house rather than move all the way to Russia. Since then, net migration from Kazakhstan to Russia has picked up speed, so David Laitin's crystal ball seems to have served him well here also.

With regard to Ukraine, of course, no-one even a few years ago could have predicted the war first in eastern Ukraine in 2014 and then Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. These developments inevitably have major impact on identity trajectories in the country. It seems that after 2014, many Russians and Russian-speaking titulars in Ukraine became Ukrainian patriots without feeling any pressure to change their everyday language, but after the full-scale invasion, language shift has picked up tremendously. For some, this was probably due to peer pressure, for others, a result of a strong urge to distance themselves as much as possible, also culturally, from the aggressor. This is a useful reminder that cultural shifts are strongly dependent upon political circumstances, which in some cases can change literally overnight. Therefore, today, we ought to be extremely cautious about making predictions regarding the future identity formation of the country's citizenry. The future remains open. Very much depends on the outcome of the war.

So, if Laitin's bottom lines are correct, can we conclude that his analyses are also correct? I do not think we should automatically draw that inference. A famous correct prediction based on wrong premises was made by Hélele Carrère d'Encausse in the early 1980s. As one of very few experts at the time, she insisted, correctly, that the Soviet Union would break up, but explained that this would happen as a result of demographic strain caused by high Muslim birth-rates in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The Soviet Union did break up, but not for that reason.

What are Laitin's arguments in support of his theses? His identity-change model is based on Thomas Schelling's tipping game: faced with a choice between two options – in Laitin's application, two cultural-linguistic identities – you will choose the one most favourable to your life chances. That will be the one which most of your peers also choose – make the wrong choice, and you end up in a cultural ghetto. Every one of your peers is making the same calculations at the same time as you – and you must make your choice now, before you know what the others will opt for. The payoffs for assimilation versus non-assimilation, then, will be the result of a typical coordination game. When more Russians choose to assimilate than not, the dynamics reach a tipping point, and a "cascade" sets in. Only then can you know whether you have made the correct or wrong choice.

The model is intriguing, elegant, and simple – but perhaps a little too simple? What does it mean to choose “assimilation”? This is a key term in David’s immensely rich book, so I will focus on that specific topic.

First, in Europe we use the word “assimilation” differently from how it is normally used in the United States. In European parlance, we distinguish between “integration” and “assimilation.” With integration, you are well-established in your (new) country, have learned the language and its cultural codes, have entered the labour market, and so on, but have retained your original (cultural/linguistic) identity. Assimilation, by contrast, means that you have blended in with the majority culture in your new country, and have shed your original identity.

Laitin’s book does not use the word “integration,” basically subsuming it under the concept of assimilation, which includes all stages of identity change from a minority culture towards the majority culture. He defines assimilation as “the process of adoption of the ever-changing cultural practices of dominant society with the goal of crossing a fluid cultural boundary separating [minorities] from dominant society” (p. 30).

But how can we measure this adoption of cultural practices? Laitin uses language as a proxy for cultural identity – which many commentators have found problematic. He occasionally acknowledges that linguistic assimilation and identity shift are not necessarily the same thing: on page 250, he writes: “there are a range of other realms in which assimilation can take place – in dress, surnames or diet.” Yet this admission does not influence his analysis, which remains socio-linguistic.

However, particularly in the case of the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet space, (ethnic) identities and language repertoires did not and do not always coincide. People in the post-war Soviet Union experienced contradictory influences. There were strong pressures for linguistic assimilation – but the passport regulations institutionalized ethnicity, locking people into a specific ethnic identity, even if they did not speak the language of “their” ethnic group. This Laitin knows, of course, but the way in which he describes the language/ethnicity dynamics in the Soviet Union seems not fully satisfactory.

For instance, he claims that in many republics, assimilators among titulars “were held in deep suspicion by their fellow nationals.” That may be correct, but only if we define linguistic assimilation as “complete abandonment of the titular language.” Only in those cases were assimilators denounced as “mankurts” – people without identity. On page 57, however, Laitin writes: “A Kazakh who spoke perfect Russian continued to experience residual prejudice and suspicion as a possible fifth columnist.” I disagree. The entire cultural and political elite in Kazakhstan spoke perfect Russian and continue to do so today. As they are the ones now calling the shots in Kazakhstani politics and economic life, this does not impede their career chances in any way. There is a growing pressure in Kazakhstan to make people learn proper Kazakh, but no pressure to make them abandon Russian.

I also feel that Laitin is not quite consistent in his usage of the term “assimilation.” Usually, it represents a continuum, but at other times it refers only to the higher stages of “adoption of majority cultural practices.” On page 260, he writes that “reasonably high expected economic returns for a linguistic assimilation is not in itself powerful enough to induce Megalomanians towards Ruritanian fluency, which would be a significant step in the road towards Ruritanian assimilation.” Here, it is clear that even complete fluency in the titular language does not qualify as “assimilation” for Laitin. I agree – but is this consistent with what he writes elsewhere?

Discussing the language situation in the Soviet Union, Laitin notes the (largely successful) tip from “parochialism” to “unassimilated bilingualism.” However, it is not clear to me how he defines the divide between “unassimilated” and “assimilated bilingualism.” Presumably, “assimilated bilinguals” knew Russian better than they knew the titular language. The vast majority of non-titulars in the Soviet Union were *both* bilingual and unassimilated (at least if we understand “assimilation” in the way we do in Europe); however, that was not primarily a reflection of their language capabilities, but of the nationality policy of the Soviet authorities. Only non-Russians who lived outside their eponymous republic became monolingual Russian speakers.

Laitin does seem to recognize that the tipping game is too simple a model with which to capture the intricacies of language-shift dynamics in the post-Soviet space, as indicated when he

acknowledges that there are several consecutive or overlapping games. The first game concerns whether one learns the titular language as a second language. The decision to send one's child to a school using a Russian or a titular medium of instruction is described as a "second game."

At the time when David Laitin was preparing his book, very few Russian parents sent their children to titular-language schools, so the second tipping game model "did not have much interest," but one could envisage a certain point when this would change. And now it has changed, particularly in the Baltics, where it has become a matter of state policy. For instance, in March 2018, the Latvian authorities decided that all state-financed secondary schools, and also those that had hitherto been bilingual, would become monolingual, giving instruction in Latvian only. Such state decisions, beyond the control of minority-population parents, strongly influence that second tipping game.

On page 201, Laitin formulates the central research question: "Can Russians become titulars?" But surely a person of Russian parentage, living in Latvia, can learn fluent Latvian in addition to his or her Russian mother tongue without becoming a "titular"? Even if practically all Russian pupils in Latvia attend Latvian-language schools, that does not necessarily mean that they see themselves – and are seen by others – as Ruritanians or ethnic Latvians. Identity-wise, they can still regard themselves as Russians, and many probably will. Consequently, can we expect a third tipping game in the future, from "assimilated bilinguals" towards "monolingual titulars"?

I am trained as a historian and area-studies specialist, with limited training in formal modelling, and David Laitin was among the first people to introduce me to formal model thinking. I have benefited tremendously from this – as have very many of my colleagues working with issues of ethnic identity and culture shift. But perhaps there is a trade-off between rigour and richness in social analysis, after all. Having reread *Identity in formation* for a third time, I asked myself: with so many factors pulling in different directions, perhaps the dynamics of identity shift are too complex for simple modelling?

Coda (2025)

David D. Laitin, Stanford University

Twenty-seven years after its publication, *Identity in Formation* remains vital. According to Google Scholar, it has garnered 806 additional citations since the retrospective above was written in 2018. But more important, its speculations on interethnic and inter-republican violence remain depressingly relevant. In this *coda*, I offer a few updates on Estonia and Kazakhstan, and then address the question of our time, the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

On Assimilation Cascades

Survey data in Estonia (Kalmus et al. 2020) challenged my proposed mechanism of assimilation, which I called "competitive assimilation." This theoretical model motivated my prediction for assimilation cascades in the Baltics. This game theoretic model assumed, as was the case in the Baltics, a vibrant labor market for white-collar workers that advantaged Russian-speakers who had full facility in the titular language. Russian-speakers would have preferred a linguistically segmented labor market that provided them a full range of opportunities, but as each family defected from this vision by enrolling their kids in the few open slots in Baltic medium schools, there would be a race for early success in the titular-led labor market, leading to an assimilation cascade.

In a critique of my work, the research team led by Kalmus argued that a single model was inadequate. Instead, there have been multiple paths of accommodation to the Soviet collapse by the Russian-speaking minority. Some 21% of them are apathetic, nostalgic for Soviet culture, and lack ambition to crack the white-collar labor market. Meanwhile 26% of respondents are proud of Russian culture with its ties to the Orthodox Church. They have technical skills, good jobs, and are loyal to Estonian institutions, even though 90% of them have no facility in its language. A related group of 35% balances loyalty to the Estonian state with political engagement to protect their minority rights, though a third of them retain their Soviet-era passports. According to Kalmus

et al.'s data, it is only a final group of around 19% who have cascaded toward a full Estonian identity. There is (as of writing) no evidence of this final group influencing the choices of the other three groups to assimilate before their children lose future opportunities. As noted earlier, this is in part due to an option – emigrating to other EU countries – that I did not foresee. In any event, undermining my theoretical expectations, cultural shift in Estonia is more of a slow linear process rather than an assimilation cascade. In this regard, Pål Kolstø's judgment at the 2018 Association for the Study of Nationalities panel was profound: *Identity in Formation* was prescient, but the predictions it offered were not derived from my abstract model.¹⁰

On the predicted exit cascade from Kazakhstan

As reported in my 2018 paper, there were Kazakhstan was 42.7% Russian in the 1959 census, 29.9% after a decade of independence in 1999, and 21.5% in 2014. This went down to 14.9% in 2024 (as was reported under “Ethnic Demography of Kazakhstan” in Wikipedia on April 8, 2025). Several factors have sustained the exit of Russians from Kazakhstan. First, since the early 2010s, Kazakhstan has been spearheading greater inter-regional cooperation in Central Asia that does not include Russia – partly in reaction to Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea. Second, the Russian-led intervention of Collective Security Treaty Organization troops to protect President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in mass protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022 led to a backlash. Although the protests were over economic issues, it raised red flags concerning Russia's interest in dominating the country. To avoid appearing as if his country were in Moscow's orbit, Tokayev refused to back Russia's war against Ukraine. Kazakhstan abstained in UN votes to condemn Russia's invasion; yet no troops were committed despite President Putin's demands. Tokayev refused to help Russia evade sanctions, and blocked weapons sales to Russia (Jones and Smyth, 2022). Kazakhstan has also been spearheading greater inter-regional cooperation in Central Asia that does not include Russia, seeking closer military alliances with Uzbekistan as well as other non-Russian partners (Jones and Smyth 2022). Furthermore, the Kazakhstani government has increasingly been giving new Kazakh names to cities and villages and inducing ethnic Kazakhs from other regions and abroad (from China, Russia, and Uzbekistan) to move to where ethnic Russians live (Daminov 2021). Russian-speakers in Ukraine were largely unnerved by this *volte face* in Kazakh policy. In addition, the influx of anti-war Russians escaping the draft for the Ukrainian war has exacerbated ethnic tensions on the border with Russia. Jones and Smyth (2022) report that during an anti-war demonstration in March 2022, showing fear of a Russian invasion, Kazakhstanis held signs that read, “Yesterday Georgia, today Ukraine, tomorrow Kazakhstan?” Finally, the delicate interethnic balance fostered by decades of rule by Nursultan Nazarbayev has been eroding, marked by several interethnic riots among minority populations in the country's south (Daminov 2021; Lim 2021). These factors are reflected in public opinion. Survey evidence (relying on a clever list experiment) showed that while 64% of ethnic Russians supported Kazakhstan's membership in the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization, this compared to only 42% of ethnic Kazakhs. The unstable ethnic balance in the country sends a signal to the Russians that they cannot rely on future state support for their livelihoods, and these factors help explain what I called their “contingency plans for exit” (Laitin 1998, 361). This is not quite the cascade of the *pièdes noirs* from Algeria, but with the same threat of a nationalizing program by the indigenous government. In this case, contra Pål Kolstø, the model did offer insight on the increasing incentives for Russian-speakers in Kazakhstan to exit.

On internationality violence

My prediction of a Belgian-like consociation in Ukraine appears today egregiously naïve. The portrayal of a Russian-speaking east, a Ukrainian-speaking west, and a bilingual Kyiv turned out to be a fantasy. What did I get wrong? First, I did not appreciate the unwillingness of Ukraine's

western elites to consider a federal bargain. Federalism was resolutely opposed by President Yushchenko and virtually by the entire western population. Although agreeing on the boundaries of the federal units would have engendered conflict, these could have been reconciled with plebiscites. The vote to repeal the 2012 language law in 2014 ended any chance for federalism and was a spark to the subsequent uprising in the Donbas. Second, and this is shown in Arel and Driscoll (2023), I did not factor into my analysis the degree of miscalculation by both sides of the conflict despite centuries of cultural and political interaction. (They knew each other well.) Putin surely miscalculated the degree to which identity as a Russian (*russki*) implied loyalty to or desired membership in Russia (*rossiane*) and wrongly assumed that the Russian-speakers in eastern Ukraine were natural allies for his wider project of reconstituting the Soviet world (*sovetskiy mir*). Post-2022 surveys and focus groups in Ukraine revealed a growing unity across Russian- and Ukrainian-speakers on a ethnonationalist identity, an outcome that undermined Putin's expectations (Kulyk 2023). In a parallel manner, both post-Maidan governments in Kyiv miscalculated the Kremlin mission (and Putin's obsession) to restore Russia's historic boundaries, even if it involved major warfare.

Was the van Houten model discredited by history? I think not. Putin went on the offensive consistent with his belief that Russia's reconstituted army as it functioned in the Georgia war of 2008 was ready to decimate Ukrainian forces. This view was not completely unfounded.¹¹ And again consistent with van Houten, Kyiv overestimated its support from western democracies to counter a Russian invasion, given signals from the US Ambassador on future membership in NATO.¹² The model correctly portrayed the strategic situation faced by those in the triadic configuration – Russia, Ukraine, and the Russian-speakers in the Donbas – but the parameter values supporting two decades of uneasy peace changed, incentivizing the risk of war.

I want to thank Harris Mylonas, editor of *Nationalities Papers*, for giving me a chance to rethink my analyses of the political aftermath of the Soviet world.

Notes

- 1 Subsequent to this quote, I will liberally quote and paraphrase from *Identity in Formation* often without attribution.
- 2 Students of contested nationalisms inevitably reveal their partisan preferences in the spelling of place names. My use of Kyiv acknowledges what Max Weber (1968, vol.2, pp. 952-54) would call Ukraine's "legitimate authority" to name the city, and not any preference in regards to the proper language to refer to it.
- 3 See Solzhenitsyn (1990) for a troubling attempt in defining a common Slav national identity.
- 4 "Rationalization," relying on M. Weber (1968, 809-38), plays a key role in my analyses of nation-building. In *Identity in Formation* (1998, 39, 350), I define it as "the process by which a ruler, in order to make ruling more efficient, prescribes a set of practices that become standard for the entire population."
- 5 The matched guise experiment had subjects evaluate titular- and Russian-speakers who read a common text in both languages with subjects not knowing the identity of the speakers. The experiment was designed to reveal the status of the indigenous language compared to Russian.
- 6 Derived from the theoretical work of Thomas Schelling (1978), this "tipping" or "cascade" model foresaw a point when a sufficient percentage of the population changed their strategy (in my case, in choosing a language of instruction for their children), it would be rational for everyone else in that population to quickly follow.
- 7 For a less sanguine picture on the success of the Ukrainian national project in the East, see Arel (2018) and Giuliano (2018). Of course, Crimea is a scholarly black box; the implications of its future incorporation into the Russian Federation or its re-incorporation into Ukraine can only be based on raw speculation.

- 8 This is discussed in Mylonas (2012), pp. 180–85.
- 9 While not a single regional or urban council in Eastern Ukraine supported the insurgency, there was latent popular support for Russia among Russia's co-fatherlanders. However, co-fatherlander elites – i.e. the oligarchs – in eastern Ukraine largely remained loyal to Kyiv, perhaps because they feared for their wealth should they come under Putin's sway (R. Grigoriev, personal communication).
- 10 Similarly Turchin (2003, ch. 6), relying on a range of statistical models to analyze cultural change, found the tipping model reported in *Identity in Formation* inconsistent with the reported trends.
- 11 Based on observation of elite Russian military units, effectiveness in Syria, this position was widely-shared by the U.S. intelligence community and most military analysts. See Barry Posen (2022).
- 12 William B. Taylor, then US Ambassador to Ukraine, wrote in an op-ed in *The New York Times* ("Give Ukraine NATO Membership. Peace Depends on It," Oct. 11, 2024) that in 2008 at the NATO Summit, President George W. Bush sent signals of US support for Ukraine's membership in NATO and transmitted this to Ukraine's leaders.

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