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Russia's strategic personality and its influence on the relationship with the West

Abstract

Since 1991, the relationship between Russia and the West was marked by cooperation and competition. While in the first years of the newly formed Federation the ideas of the westernizers prevailed, the (neo) eurasianist postulates dominate the current national discourse, leading to stagnation in its relationship with the West. Such ideological reorientation is the result of external shocks in the international system, as well as internal. In this work, the main Russian and Western schools of thought are analyzed, contrasting them to explain, from the perspective of Neoclassical realism, the perception and behavior of Moscow, in relation to Western countries, at different stages in the global arena.

Keywords

Russia, the West, strategic personality, westernism, (neo) eurasianism.

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Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union meant a loss of national identity for Russia. Subsequent presidents, especially Yeltsin and Putin, tried to shape the country's national identity. In this sense, by taking as a starting point the idea of national identity as a state construct created to legitimise itself as different¹, two main schools of thought prevail in Russian intellectual circles, Westernist and Slavophile. These schools branch into different currents among which the Westernist, Eurasianist-Pragmatist and (neo)Eurasianist schools have had the greatest impact on Kremlin policy post-1991. Although they share some common assumptions, each of them highlights different categories to explain Russian national identity and the path for the country's development.

It is also worth noting the difference in perception between Russian and Western intellectual circles about the drivers of Russian behaviour in the global arena. While in Western circles the idea prevails that Russia's behaviour in the domestic and international sphere is mainly determined by the West's actions² ('outside-in' theory), for most Russian intellectuals domestic concerns are the main driver of actions in the international arena ('inside-out' theory). Without a doubt, it can be argued that both external shocks, which have had a particular impact on Putin's first and second terms, and domestic shocks, which were notable during his third term, have influenced the Kremlin's actions. While in the early years of the 'Putin era' an attempt was made to establish a friendly relationship with the West, in the later years a reassessment of their relationship took place due to various disagreements, as well as the redirection of world affairs towards Asia.

In this paper, we will analyse the strategic personality of the Russian Federation, seen from both domestic Russian and Western perspectives, after the collapse of the USSR and how this affects the country's relationship with the West. Although much has been written on the subject of Russian behaviour in the international arena and the relationship with Western countries, there is a lack of research that includes both perspectives. Finally, we will shed light on the real strategic personality traits that influence their behaviour and, drawing on neoclassical Realism, describe how national identity affects Kremlin policy decisions. This study is relevant because: first, Russia's relationship with the West affects international dynamics, as the country is an important player in the regional and global arena; second, the issue of Russian national identity and its effects on Russian foreign policy requires further elaboration; and third, the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism allows for the elaboration of

1 Contreras-Luna, R. (2019). Moscow great power dilemmas: the role of Asiatic Russia in Russia-China relations. *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* [online]. Vol. 15, no. 2, p. 3. [Accessed: 2 March 2021]. Available at: https://ijaps.usm.my/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/IJAPS-152_ART1-1-29.pdf

2 Understood as the United States and its European allies.

an analysis from a different theoretical perspective, contributing to a better deepening and understanding of the subject.

Thus, in the following sections, based on a qualitative method and applying a comparative analysis, we will carry out a review of primary and secondary bibliographical sources on the thoughts of important Russian and Western authors on the national identity and strategic personality of the country, as well as collect external information from speeches of important Kremlin figures. In addition, drawing on neoclassical realism, we will analyse Russia's strategy and behaviour in relation to the West and how its national identity and strategic personality affect the West. Finally, we will present some conclusions from the analysis.

Between the two perspectives

The Russian domestic perspective

During Russian history the historical-philosophical ideas, represented by the monk Philotheus of Peskov (the creator of the theory of 'Moscow-Third Rome') and Slavophiles like M. Bakunin and V. Solovyov, were the element forming the foundations of Russian foreign policy and state ideology. This changed in the 20th century, and specifically in 1990, with geopolitical paradigms replacing the historical philosophy prevalent in previous centuries. Following Russian political thought, the nascent geopolitical currents bifurcated political theories of international relations conditioned by geographical determinism, classical realism, the theory of civilisations, cultural and religious thought, as well as geostrategy.

Thus, with the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russian geopolitical thinking collided with the question that had prevailed for centuries in the country's intellectual circles: Should Russia integrate into Western processes or follow its own unique path? This question was directly related to the vision of what Russia is and should be, as well as what its strategic personality is. Westernists and Slavophiles, a patriotic movement and heir to the ideas of the *dikabristy*³, are the two major branches of Russian thought that tried, and are still trying, to answer these questions. The former associate the West with democracy, freedom, civil society, progress and the nation-state while viewing the East as despotic, imperial and autocratic; Slavophiles, in turn, perceive the West as morally decadent, exploitative and under the American yoke, while appreciating the unity, order and strong state that characterise the East. Even in the face of divergent perceptions of the way forward for the nation, both schools converge on the existence of several fundamental realities that forge the country's strategic personality, although they interpret them in different ways. These include (1) the messianic nature of the Russian people and

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³ First movement of noble-revolutionaries who, in 1825, took up arms to establish a constitutional order in the Russian Empire. The main slogans of the movement were the ideas of bourgeois revolution, which would sweep away feudalism and allow the development of a capitalist system.

the importance of anthropological and spiritual interests, (2) the recurrence to the civilisational basis, as well as (3) the continental factor (Russia as a tellurocracy) from which its (4) self-perception as a great power (*velikoderzhavnost*) derives⁴.

In this vein, it should first be noted that the Russian conquest of space (16th-20th centuries) saw the expansion of a single centre of power, Moscow, with a single supreme authority, the Tsar. The non-existence of alternative centres of power or colonies allowed Russia to maintain its geopolitical unity and continuity. Thus, in the struggle for space, the Russian people had to forge the messianic idea in order to unite and shape the vast territories of the Empire. On the other hand, the conception of Moscow as a 'Third Rome' was formulated after the appointment of the *Kniaz*' as the successor of the Byzantine emperor, as well as the Tsar of all Russia⁵. Following a logical process, the appearance of the Byzantine emblem of a double-headed eagle on the ancient coat of arms of Moscow, depicting St George the Victorious, as well as the marriage of Ivan III to Sophia Paleolog gave way to the subsequent rise of pan-Orthodox messianism. This movement also contributed to the ultimate end of the Russian national idea, or messianism. In parallel, based on L. Mechnikov's anthro-geographical determinism⁶, the idea of the Russians as a different civilisation developed. The ideology of *Ruskiy Mir* is undoubtedly the current main concept of civilisational basis combining Orthodox religion, Russian culture, language and tradition, as well as common history. This idea was institutionalised in 2007 in the Ruskiy Mir Foundation, which aims to promote Russian language and culture, as well as programmes and exchanges that reconnect the Russian community abroad with their homeland.

The narrative of the concept is based on geopolitical centres deriving from geopolitical points of resistance that keep the total area of territory under the control of the metropolis⁷. This notion was expanded over time by the introduction of the ideas

4 Trenin, D. (2015). *Rossiya i mir v XXI veke* [Russia in the 21st century] [online]. Moscow, Eksmo. [Accessed: 10 March 2021]. ISBN 978-5-699-84586-6. Available at: http://loveread.ec/read_book.php?id=51215&p=1; Tsimburkiy, V. (2007). *Ostrov Rossiya. 1993-2006*. Insular Russia. 1993-2006 [online]. Moscow, ROSSPEN. [Accessed: 20 March 2021]. ISBN 978-5-8243-0870-9. Available at: <https://topliba.com/books/702953>; Dugin, A. (2002). *Osnovi geopolitiki* [The basics of geopolitics] [online]. Moscow, Vector-Eurasia. [Accessed: 10 March 2021], p. 359. Available at: <https://vector-eurasia.org/books/Dugin.Geopolitika.pdf>; Ivashov, L. (2015). *Geopolitika russkoy tsivilizatsii* [Geopolitics of Russian civilisation]. Moscow, Institute of Russian Civilisation, pp. 749-759. ISBN 978-5-4261-0105-0; Korovin, V. (2018). *Udar po Rossii. Geopolitika i predchuvstviye voyny* [The blow to Russia. Geopolitics and the premonition of war]. St Petersburg, Dom Pyter. Pp. 191-193. ISBN 978-5-4461-0494-9.

5 See Ivashov, L. (2015).

6 Good spatial management is only possible through a thorough study of the characteristics of the space, the character and nature of the people who occupy it, in their close relationship and mutual influence throughout history. See Mechnikov, L. (1995). *Tsyvlyzatsiya y velykiye ystorychyskiye reky* [Civilisation and great historical rivers]. Moscow, Pangea-Progress. ISBN 5-01-004448-X.

7 Panteleev, S. (2019). Donbass v geopolitike Russkogo mira [Donbas in the geopolitics of Ruskiy Mir]. In: *Russian Diaspora Institute* [online]. 3 April. [Accessed: 8 March 2021]. Available at: <https://russkie.org/articles/donbass-v-geopolitike-russkogo-mira/>

of 'network structure' and the 'network empire', understood from the perspective of Eurasian integration, as well as contributions from information and cyberspace geopolitics that underlined the importance of the use of information and social networks as an effective tool of influence⁸. On the other hand, based on the idea that none of the civilisations is capable of constructing universal 'final' forms of social structure, the principle of equality between them and the existence of a personal path for the progress of each of them was put forward. It is true that while the Slavophiles defend the existence of a unique path, different from the West, for Russia's progress, the Westernists consider that the country, although a different civilisation, can only develop fully if it participates in the process of Western development. Thus, while Westernists describe Peter I's reforms as an important step the nation took towards integration with the West, Slavophiles will see them as a blow to their identity.

Along the same lines, some thinkers⁹ consider that the Eurocentric approach does not objectively explain the history of Russia and the peoples of the East, presenting it as an appendix to European history. Intellectuals from the (neo)Eurasianist camp argue that a civilisation must have the potential to preserve the historical pool of forces, as well as a population with unlimited willingness for self-sacrifice, discipline and a strong spirit. In this respect, since the beginning of the 18th century, the Russian people have played an undisputed role in the country's victory against Charles XII, Frederick II, Napoleon I and Hitler. One could also speak of the Russian colonisation of the Northeast, which historically was a reserve of Russian power that destroyed the Finnish tribes and restored the idea of Russian unity, whose successors were Peter I and Catherine II.

This leads to the assertion of civilisational identity as an essential factor that provides integrity to large spaces and whose political fragmentation around a civilisation leads to the deprivation of political strength resulting in the inability to resist external violence and danger. Therefore, it is concluded that the peoples speaking close languages and dialects must form a single political entity; the Russian people, consisting of 'Great Russians'/Russians, 'Little Russians'/Ukrainians and 'White Russians'/Byelorussians, must be part of a single state that would be integrated into a union of the Slavic peoples. This line of thinking is especially advocated by Slavophiles, but is also present in Westernist circles where, for example, the unique importance of Ukraine for Russia in terms of issues of identity (Empire—nation-state—*Ruskiy Mir*), sovereignty (Russian place, functions and capabilities in a US-dominated world), security (general security or balance of power) and integration (Greater Europe or Greater Eurasia) is asserted¹⁰.

As part of the civilisational theory, the continentalist theory was developed, the leading exponents of which are the Eurasianists. The theory is based on the idea of

8 Korovin, V. (2018).

9 Trenin, D. (2015); Tsimburskiy, V. (2007); Dugin, A. (2002).

10 Trenin, D. (2015).

Russia as an ethnographically and culturally special world occupying an intermediate position between Europe and Asia (*heartland*¹¹ or *Russia-Eurasia*). This intermediate position of the country is understood to form the basis of its identity composed of Aryan-Slavic culture, Turkish nomadism and Orthodox tradition; it is an independent historical and spiritual geopolitical reality called Eurasia. In this vein, Russia's expansion to the Northeast is an important factor that influenced Russian national identity; it allowed it to develop from an Eastern European state into a multi-ethnic, bi-continental, landlocked empire that can claim the status of a global power¹².

While Westernists consider that the impetus for the development of *heartland* comes from Europe, (neo)Eurasianist authors¹³ defend the idea that *Russia-Eurasia* is the very synthesis of culture and history and the nature of Russia participates in the full development of its culture and, at the same time, is the Mongolosphere; the formation of a mixture of Byzantine and Mongolian influence is present¹⁴. Such a Mongolian perception of the continent is opposed to the Western European perception of the sea (telurocracy versus thalassocracy¹⁵).

For (neo)Eurasianists, the participation of the telurocracies in the single world market¹⁶, leads to existence on the periphery of the global economic and geopolitical system; to reduce the high transport costs borne by the telurocracies, it is proposed to develop regional relations¹⁷. Today, following this idea, Moscow is trying to exploit its potential as a transit country, which can be seen in the development of corridors such as the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor, and by pursuing close cooperation within organisations such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Although the Westernist current affirms Russia's need to integrate into Western processes, partially negating the postulates of the (neo)Eurasianist authors, it does recognise the

11 See Mackinder, H. (2004). The geographical pivot of history. In: *The Geographical Journal* [online]. December, vol. 170, issue 4, pp. 298-321. [Accessed: 5 October 2021]. Available at: https://www.iwp.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/20131016_MackinderTheGeographicalJournal.pdf

12 Trenin, D. (2012). Russia can pivot to the Pacific, too. In: *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* [online]. 7 September. [Accessed: 19 May 2021]. Available at: <https://carnegie.ru/2012/09/07/russia-can-pivot-to-pacific-too-pub-49312>

13 Tsimburskiy, V. (2007); Dugin, A. (2002).

14 Thanks to the Mongol-Tatar yoke, Russia was able to maintain geopolitical and spiritual independence from the Romano-Germanic world, as well as to preserve its ethnic uniqueness.

15 Thalassocracy is understood to be a commercial system, liberal democracy and pragmatism, while telurocracy is ideocracy (in any of its variants), domination of a religious ideal and hierarchical government.

16 The single world market is an organisational and cohesive factor that generates a solid economic basis for thalassocracies.

17 Islamic and Confucian potential, with Iran and China in the lead, are pointed to as potential allies against Western globalism.

need for close regional cooperation with neighbours. Undoubtedly, both schools underline the importance of the country's geographical position as a decisive factor in shaping its relations with the world, and especially with the West.

Such a self-perception of Russia as a different world derives from the idea of *velikoderzhavnost* on which the country's modern national identity is being built, integrating not only new realities but also historical events such as the Battle of Kulikovo or the Second World War. Thus, in the political discourse we find the idea of a country with a powerful army, the re-emergence of Russia as a great power and the conquest of a worthy place in the world. In line with L. Ivashov's thinking, from this self-perception of great power and imperial character derive the country's responses to geopolitical challenges such as the geographical conditionality of the policy of territorial expansion, directed mainly towards the East and West, and access to the sea to absorb 'unstable geopolitical zones'¹⁸. It is also important to mention the existence, within the Slavophile school, of the concept of *insular Russia* coined by V. Tsymburskiy which points to the *Russia-Heartland/Eurasia* concepts as reductionist and incapable of geopolitically identifying Russia. The author criticises Westerners for not taking into account that Russia, being a giant country, is not compatible with the European balance and will always be seen as an enemy¹⁹.

Following the postulates of P. Semenov-Tian-Shanskiy and A. Vandam, both of whom assert Russia's need to defend its access to the East and South Seas, both Tsymburskiy and Ivashov advocate the need to focus on regional rather than global priorities. They affirm the need to exploit the country's Eurasian character and its importance from a transport perspective, as well as to promote demographic growth and economic development, especially in the Asian area. In the same vein, the Westernists propose another principle as a vector of *Ruskiy Mir's* doctrine, asserting the Kremlin's need to gather people rather than land²⁰.

Finally, as mentioned above, Slavophiles exclude the existence of global human development and stress the individualism of each nation and community. In this sense, Russia cannot be identified as a fully European state because of its geographical position and its different perception of the world, manifested in the legal and political spheres, as well as the 'special spirit of the Russian people'; these elements forge the 'Russian idea', which is supranational, Orthodox and Christian.

It is also important to emphasise the special critique of European parliamentarism, which is a critique of liberalism and revolution. Following this logic, the aforementioned penetration of Western ideas such as democracy leads to revolution. Along these lines, fears of the 'domino effect' of the colour revolutions grew, leading to intervention in the Georgian war and the merger of the Crimean peninsula with Russia,

¹⁸ Ivashov, L. (2015).

¹⁹ Tsymburskiy, V. (2007).

²⁰ See Trenin, D. (2015).

as well as the consequent worsening of relations with the West, which were already chronically problematic. While these developments are perceived by (neo)Eurasianists as a US crusade against Russia, which is part of the 'rest' not subordinate to their interests²¹, advocates of the nationalist anti-Westernist current, like Westernists, point to the danger of the (neo)Eurasianists' postmodern concept and their 'crusade against the West' as exposing Russia to conflict²².

The Western perspective

Already in 1995, one of the major contributors to the study of Russian behaviour, G. Hosking, pointed to the imperial character of the Russian state. During the Soviet era, Russian identity was suppressed in favour of a universalist (*vselenkost*), exceptionalist and messianic state, principles that paradoxically reinforced national identity by later deriving in the concept of Russian civilisation. Thus, messianism, widespread in the 16th-17th centuries²³ and suppressed in the context of the Schism of the Church and the reforms of Peter the Great, re-emerged in the 20th century in the form of Marxism²⁴.

Russian national identity was formulated from the statist and supranational perspective resulting in neo-Rossiyskiy; internationalist socialism had a Russian imperial speech and face while the hierarchical relationship with other non-Russian peoples was restored. This move towards a more traditional, great power, pragmatic perspective, based on neo-Rossiyskiy imperialism, was also accentuated by the implementation of a new religious policy. In this line, the difference between the ethnic (*ruskiy*) and imperial (*rossiyskiy*) aspects of Russianness, which was the cause of the disintegration of the empire in 1917, should be emphasised. All this gave way to the subsequent crystallisation of a 'Russianness' based on ethnic, imperial and Soviet elements. Still, it should be noted that with the emigration of ethnic Russians to other republics and thanks to the presence of their own key institutions during the Soviet period, they identified more with the Soviet Union as a whole than with the former empire or the Russian Federation²⁵.

21 Dugin, A. (2002). P. 359; Korovin, V. (2018).

22 Trenin, D. (2015); Tsimburkiy, V. (2007).

23 The notion of the Rus as the Eastern Christian ecumenical community and guarantor of the true faith prevailed.

24 Hosking, G. (1997). *Russia: people and empire, 1552-1917*. Cambridge; Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, p. 19. ISBN 0-674-78118-X; Kissinger, H. (2011). *The World Order*. New York, Penguin Books Limited. Pp. 193-195. ISBN 9781101445358.

25 The prevalence of language and ethnic Russians in the leadership, as well as the perception of the defeat of Nazi Germany as a national victory, led to the identification of ethnic Russians with the USSR.

This led to the establishment of a state regime in Russia in the late 1990s that was a hybrid of authoritarianism and democracy. The ensuing discrediting of Yeltsin and his anti-communism, the perceived loss of prestige and superpower status, and growing support for the communists undermined the legitimising foundations of the state and regime²⁶. Nostalgia for the Soviet era combined with disillusionment with Western economic postulates, as well as a sense of betrayal by the West, with its expansion of NATO seen as the culmination of its policy to isolate Russia and criticism of Russian policy in Chechnya, pushed Russia further away from the West and encouraged nationalism. All this has to be understood in the context of globalisation and the desires to defend one's own culture against homogenisation, as well as the gap between the new political elite, with a president and prime minister unable to provide consistent geostrategic leadership, who failed to assess the domestic and international situation at the time²⁷.

Attempts to formulate a new national idea to legitimise the regime were in vain until the arrival of the 'Putin era'. During President Putin's first two terms in office, the anthem of the USSR was maintained as the anthem of the newly formed Federation and the achievements of the Soviet era were praised, while Tsarist symbols remained in order to build an ethnically based national identity, integrating positive imperial and Soviet elements, and to achieve consensus within the state²⁸. At the same time, the various definitions of the Russian nation took shape²⁹, which are still present in Russian intellectual and political circles today. The amalgamation of definitions allowed the regime to draw inspiration from contradictory facts, such as the mixture of Soviet-Czarist ideology or ethnocentric-multiculturalist ideas, resulting in a flexible and adaptable doctrine. Among these currents, the civic definition encompassing all citizens of the Federation should be underlined. This, in theory, is defended by Putin, although it is true that on several occasions in Russian foreign policy he has adhered to the notion of Russian speakers (*rossiyani*) and compatriots (*sootchestvenniki*) settled on the territory of the former republics and the need to defend their rights.

In line with the thinking of A. Lieven, who argues that empire building gave Russians a weak ethnic identity that helped to avoid conflicts with the other republics³⁰, the current strengthening of the national discourse is conducive to the emergence of clashes between Russia and post-Soviet states. In this regard, the resurgence of the

26 Brzezinski, Z. (1997). *The grand chessboard: American primacy and the geostrategic imperatives*. New York, Basic Books. Pp. 91-93. ISBN 0465-02726-1.

27 After communism, Russia was too backward and devastated to be a viable democratic partner for the United States. See Brzezinski, Z. (1997).

28 Shevtsova, L. (2003). *Putin's Russia*. Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Pp. 144-145. ISBN 0-87003-201-1.

29 The defenders of imperial identity, ethnic base, linguistic base, and blood ties.

30 Lieven, A. (1999). *Chechnya: tombstone of Russian power*. New Haven; London, Yale University Press. P. 376. ISBN 9780300078817.

debate on the rights of the 'Russian diaspora' in the 'near abroad' should be noted, especially after Estonia and Latvia's refusal to offer citizenship to ethnic Russians who arrived there after the integration of these territories into the Soviet Union. Thus, from the initial indifference towards the Russian diaspora, political elites started to use it for political purposes by framing it within the concept of *Ruskiy Mir*³¹ which, understood from an ethnic/cultural and spiritual perspective, is opposed to the Western world.

In the same vein, I. Zevelev³², arguing against G. Hosking's idea that Russia is to become a nation-state along the lines of the Western model, points out the danger of such a situation that would boost ethnic-nationalism in the country and could lead to conflicts with neighbouring countries where Russian minorities are established. According to the author, the importance of territorial integrity within the country's existing borders is clearly exemplified by the two wars in Chechnya, as Russia has always presented itself as a defender of principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as being critical of attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of other states and unilateral/multilateral attempts by other countries to change international norms. As for the annexation of Crimea, this is a particular case as it was a reaction to the threat to Russia's 'civilisational identity' and historical narrative. Undoubtedly, relations with the CIS are listed in official documents as Moscow's top regional priority. Thus, although after the failure to focus defences on the external borders of the CIS³³, Russia began strengthening its own borders, peacekeeping and stability activities in other Commonwealth countries did not cease despite the wishes of the governments of those countries³⁴.

Such a hierarchical relationship with other nations derives from the imperial consciousness which, in turn, allows Russia to claim the status of a global power with an

31 From a cultural/civilisational perspective, this concept is understood as a modernised version of the 'Russian idea' as it fulfils its main characteristics such as supranational/transnational character, messianism, conventionality of territorial borders, friend-enemy contrast, and the need to protect its ideas/values from external influence; from the religious perspective, the Russian world is a self-sufficient Christian-Orthodox civilisation whose core is the Russian Orthodox Church that legitimises political power; finally, from the geopolitical approach, based on the idea of balance of power and multipolar world, it appears as a model for integrating the Russian-speaking community and creating an alternative global political actor to the West. The situation in Crimea marked a shift in the perception of Moscow's zone of responsibility for security issues from the level of a nation-state to a larger vague community. See Korobkova, D. (2020). *Russian World? Protection of National Minorities Abroad as a Component of Russia's Foreign Policy* [online]. Master's thesis. Prague, Charles University. [Accessed: 4 May 2021], pp. 15-20. Available at: [https://is.cuni.cz/webapps/zzp/detail/215023/?lang=en;Zevelev, I. \(2016\). Russian National Identity and Foreign Policy. Washington DC, CSIS \[online\], p. 13. \[Accessed: 2 March 2021\]. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23235?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents](https://is.cuni.cz/webapps/zzp/detail/215023/?lang=en;Zevelev, I. (2016). Russian National Identity and Foreign Policy. Washington DC, CSIS [online], p. 13. [Accessed: 2 March 2021]. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23235?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

32 Zevelev, I. (2016). P. 4.

33 The organisation combined efforts at economic cooperation with subjective imperial determination.

34 They sometimes claimed that Russia was manipulating the conflict to maintain its influence in the region.

exceptional role emanating from its status as the heir of the Byzantine Empire, and thus the authentic seat of the Christian church, as well as the saviour of Europe in the Napoleonic and Second World Wars ('patriotic wars'). Apart from Russia's perception of its role in religion and history, the warrior impetus of the steppe, which was occupied to protect against invasion, and the harsh climate, which fostered the development of people's ability to withstand various problems and sacrifice for the common cause, are further factors that contributed to the forging of the Russian character and imperial consciousness³⁵.

Likewise, the possession of vast flat plains without natural borders has resulted in the need to «*have buffer zones or zones of influence to gain reaction time in case of invasion or attack from outside*»³⁶. This quest for security also explains the presence of strong authoritarian rulers throughout Russian history; thus Putin, like Peter the Great or Stalin, responds to the national preference for a strong leader.

Russian expansionism, also driven by gaining access to open seas, has always raised suspicions among its neighbours about Russian intentions while their reaction has often been interpreted by Moscow as an effort to isolate it from Europe. This led to an amalgamation of ethnic, cultural and religious identities within the country that will be responded to by the generation of national myths denying or celebrating the fact; from the interpretation of the Viking conquest as occurring because the conquered invite the invaders in, to the perception of Moscow as the 'Third Rome', to the Kremlin's claim to present Russia as a bastion of traditional values and a bulwark against a US-dominated world system³⁷.

Furthermore, the geographical position between Europe and Asia, and the possession of the region defined as 'Siberia' allows the country to adopt a unique Euro-pacific identity that has resulted in the formation of a Russian civilisation with its own historical development. This intermediate position allows it to claim global power status rather than being reduced to a regional power. As M. McFaul argues, in the pursuit of regaining great power status, Putin is not only a transactional leader, but also an ideological one, whose decisions are guided by his desire to promote his anti-Western world view, positioning himself as a conservative and illiberal leader³⁸.

35 Kaplan, R. (2015). *Mest' geografii* [The revenge of geography]. Moscow, Kolibri. P. 109. ISBN 978-5-389-10490-7; Kissinger, H. (2011). *The World Order*. New York, Penguin Books Limited. Pp. 168-178. ISBN 9781101445358.

36 Pardo de Santayana y Gómez de Olea, J.M. (2017). History, identity and strategy in the Russian Federation. In: *Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies* [online]. 15 March, p. 6. [Accessed: 24 February 2021]. Available at: <http://www.ieee.es/contenido/noticias/2017/03/DIEEEAI6-2017.html>

37 Galeotti, M. (2020). *A short history of Russia. How the world largest country invented itself, from the pugans to Putin*. Toronto, Hanover Square Press. ISBN: 1488076103.

38 Mcfaul, M. (2021). How to contain Putin's Russia. A strategy for containing a rising revisionist power. In: *Foreign Affairs* [online]. 19 January. [Accessed: 13 May 2021]. Available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2021-01-19/how-contain-putins-russia?utm_medium=email_notifications&utm_source=reg_confirmation&utm_campaign=reg_guestpass

Russia's strategy and behaviour in the relationship with the West

After the collapse of the USSR, Westernist thinking dominated the country. This current was especially represented by the implementation of the Kozyrev doctrine. Important steps towards cooperation were taken: in the new military doctrine of 1993, the United States was able to establish a new military doctrine. The Partnership for Peace was established within the framework of NATO and the OSCE, Russia joined the Council of Europe, and the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU entered into force. The cooperation came from the fact that the country, in order to guarantee its existence, prioritised the change of the political and economic system and therefore needed Western assistance to carry out the modernisation process. At the time, two myths prevailed: that the West, in response to Russia's withdrawal from Central Europe, would provide funds for economic recovery and that the Western model, based on liberal democracy and free market economics, would quickly take root in the country and help its resurgence. However, while Peter the Great's reforms allowed the country to integrate into the common civilisational process for modernisation, this policy led to shock therapy, formation of a pseudo-market, a criminal economy, deformation of democracy, high corruption and impoverishment of the population, which eroded the desire to follow through with the ensuing reforms for a complete transition. This situation was explained by Slavophiles by the idea that the reforms did not reflect the needs of the people and were carried out in an abrupt and revolutionary manner. Also, the loss of initiative in foreign policy that was not oriented towards the country's strategic interests led Slavophiles to point to the Kozyrev doctrine as treacherous. Undoubtedly, the dismal economic situation within the country, as well as its weak positioning in the global arena, exemplified by NATO's eastward expansion and its intervention in Kosovo against Moscow's express will, were a humiliation for Russian nationalism³⁹.

In the following years, in response to the fading euphoria, Westerners gradually formulated the consensus geopolitical model, which gravitates towards pragmatic Eurasianism. This was implemented with the formation of a 'consensus' on Russia's identity as a great power in the context of a multipolar order, based on the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, and the need to form a strong and independent state to maintain order and stability. Arguably, its tenets were adopted by Putin and after 2000, a kind of informal social contract was formulated between the regime and the broader segments of the population based on the material improvements and rejection of the 1990s⁴⁰. The growing authoritarianism of the 'Putin era' was later referred to as 'sovereign democracy'⁴¹ and took on populist overtones.

39 Pardo De Santayana Y Gómez De Olea, J.M. (2017). P. 8.

40 Bernsandt, N. Y Törnquist-Plewa, B. (Eds.) (2018). *Cultural and political imaginaries in Putin's Russia* [online]. Leiden; Boston, Brill, vol. 2, p. 2. [Accessed: 4 April 2021]. ISSN 1877-9484. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctvbqs855>

41 It is understood as a democratic system based on the Russian political tradition of authoritarianism, a strong state and leader, and the idea of society as a single entity. See Trenin, D., (2015).

Although, due to various controversies (the future of the CIS and the Baltic states; problems related to START and ABMT; friendly relations with countries such as China, Cuba, North Korea, Iran and Iraq; the military intervention in Yugoslavia; etc.), the first year of his government was characterised by distrust and antagonism towards the West, in the period 2001-2002 an attempt was made to build a relationship based on trust and partnership, as the president was focused on domestic issues. Some intellectuals⁴² claim that it was precisely his authoritarianism that led him to cooperate with the West after the war in Chechnya as part of the fight against terrorism and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. However, this did not mean the country's integration into the West as the country pursued its own interests vis-à-vis other states such as Iran and Iraq, dubbed by the US as the 'axis of evil'. As B. Lo rightly pointed out, the Russian president was not committed to a single identity in world affairs, «*he is European in Europe, transcontinental 'strategic partner' when it comes to the United States, Asian and Eurasian in Asia, and cautiously integrationist in the CIS*»⁴³.

Thus, while D. Medvedev in 2008 underlined the genuinely egalitarian cooperation between Russia, Europe and North America, these being the three branches of European civilisation⁴⁴, Foreign Minister S. Lavrov pointed out that Russia will follow a different path due to global competition with a civilisational dimension that includes values and models of development. While the first approach concerned the relationship with Western states, the second was aimed at neighbouring states⁴⁵. The multivectoral policy proposed by E. Primakov, implemented since 1996, was given greater importance in order to maintain the balance with the West and gradually regain its sphere of influence through Eurasian integration⁴⁶. This policy also allowed it a certain flexibility and independence of action in the global arena, with rapprochement with other non-Western powers.

42 Sánchez Ortega, A. (2020). La política exterior rusa y su relación con Occidente. Una visión desde el realismo neoclásico. In: *Revista Española de Derecho Internacional* [online]. January/June, vol. 72, issue 1, pp. 172-173. [Accessed: 15 June 2021]. Available at: <http://www.revista-redi.es/es/Articulos/lapolitica-exterior-rusa-y-su-relacion-con-occidente-una-vision-desde-el-realismo-neoclasic/>

43 Lo, B. (2003). *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*. London, Blackwell Publisher. P. 131. ISBN: 1-4051-0299-3.

44 Kremlin (2008). Vystupleniye Prezidenta Rossii Dmitriya Medvedeva na vstreche s politicheskimi, parlamentskimi i obshchestvennymi liderami Germanii v Berline [The speech of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev at the meeting with German political, parliamentary and civic leaders in Berlin]. 5 June [online]. [Accessed: 16 February 2021]. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/320>

45 Lavrov, S. (2008). Russia and the world in the 21st century. In: *Russia in global affairs* [online]. July/September, issue 3. [Accessed: 15 February 2021]. Available at: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russia-and-the-world-in-the-21st-century/>

46 Bugayova, N. (2019). *How we got here with Russia: The Kremlin's worldview* [online]. Washington DC, Institute for the Study of War. March, pp. 13-15. [Accessed: 10 March 2021]. Available at: https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Report_The%20Kremlin%27s%20Worldview_March%202019.pdf

Similarly, under Putin's first and second terms, domestically, some Westernising reforms were introduced, especially economic ones, cooperating with the West to obtain technology and promote trade, while authoritarianism was strengthened by maintaining Tsarist and Soviet symbols and fostering state-centred and somewhat imperial nationalism. This comes from the old Russian dilemma of how to modernise and maintain state power at the same time, which historically was attempted from above by Peter the Great, hiring foreign shipbuilders, Catherine the Great, dabbling with Western philosophies, and Nicholas II, looking to Baltic aristocrats⁴⁷. The recentralisation and strengthening of federal power and of the president was set in motion, and control over the energy sector was regained, leading to greater state interventionism in different sectors and, consequently, a greater capacity of the state to extract resources from society (which after the Georgian war were diverted to strengthen military power) and to pursue a more ambitious foreign policy. At the same time, revolutionary movements both at home and in the 'near abroad', perceived to be driven by external forces, were firmly quelled, and economic and political pressure was brought to bear on some post-Soviet republics.

In foreign policy, the Kremlin expected the West to regard Russia as a serious player and not to criticise its domestic policy. However, he felt betrayed on both counts and as early as 2007 criticised the unipolar order, adopting a nationalist and more confrontational line, which was probably with a view to his historical legacy as Russia's saviour that later lifted it from its kneeling⁴⁸. In this sense, although the period 2009-2012 saw a *reset* in relations due to domestic political changes in the US and Russia, as well as common interests in the international arena, Moscow's subsequent actions (war in Georgia, cyber-attack against Estonia, annexation of Crimea, etc.) were presented as defensive responses to Western policies.

Undoubtedly, developments such as (1) the expansion of NATO, already perceived as an offensive organisation⁴⁹, and of the EU to the East; (2) military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq that denied respect for international law; (3) the deployment of the US anti-missile system near Russia's borders that undermined its nuclear power; (4) the outbreak of the colour revolutions, which upset the balance of power in Europe and threatened to 'contaminate' Russian society and lead to regime change in the country; as well as (5) the West's attitude towards the Arab Springs which, after the events in Libya, were identified with the colour revolutions and undermined confidence in Medvedev's project, exacerbated Russia's security problems and reinforced the sense of encirclement. While the postulates of the consensus model continued to be used, such developments, together with the rise in oil prices that accelerated the

47 Kissinger, H. (2011). Pp. 181-192.

48 Galeotti, M. (2020).

49 Lukiyanov, F. (2016). Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place. In: *Foreign Affairs* [online]. May/June. [Accessed: 28 May 2021]. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2016-04-18/putins-foreign-policy>

Russian economy, led to a resurgence of nationalist, anti-Westernist and (neo)Eurasianist ideas. Following neoclassical realist thinking, such a Kremlin-driven ideological reorientation responds to the need to increase state power.

These currents start from some common underlying assumptions that are currently present in Kremlin rhetoric and official foreign policy documents. First, it is understood that world history is characterised by multipolarity and that North and East Eurasia are an alternative source of civilisational processes. Second, reference is made to the geopolitical synthesis of forest (West) and steppe (East), which underlies the status of the Russian state, key to maintaining cultural and strategic control over Asia and Eastern Europe, contributing to a balance between East and West while the cultural limitations of Western civilisation with its struggle for domination, accompanied by a complete misunderstanding of the culture of the East, only leads to conflict. Thus, while in the international arena multipolarity is promulgated for the maintenance of balance and security, in the regional framework the countries of the 'near abroad' are treated as younger siblings in need of Russia's protection. Third, it is based on the idea of the decline of Western civilisation as a conglomerate of 'chimerical' ethnic groups, so that the centre of gravity will shift towards younger peoples. Today, the relocation of world affairs to the Asia-Pacific is in line with this thesis. In this sense, with Siberia in its possession, Russia is understood to be closer to the new sceptre of gravity of international affairs and must take advantage of this situation. Several Russian intellectuals and think-tanks underlined the need for a comprehensive strategy for the development and integration of Siberia as they believe that Russia's position in the global arena will be determined by the place of its Asian territory in the new economic order⁵⁰. Moscow is thus trying to exploit its potential as a transit country, which can be seen in the development of corridors such as the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor, and by pursuing development programmes in Siberia and the Arctic, as well as close cooperation within regional organisations, such as SCO, APEC, UEE and OSC, which include Asian states.

Of particular importance are the (neo)Eurasianist ideas that were consolidated during Putin's third term in office, in the context of falling oil prices and, consequently, the worsening economic state of the country leading to social protests in 2011-2013, negatively impacting Putin's popularity and calling into question the continuation of the regime. In such a situation, the events in Ukraine, a buffer state, and in Syria, which had a galvanising effect on some of the negative consequences of the previous intervention, served the Kremlin not only to present itself as a great power in the global arena, but also to ensure the continuation of the regime by keeping the population on its side, despite the economic recession and international isolation. The ensuing pressure from the West, and its portrayal by Russian domestic propaganda as similar

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⁵⁰ See Feng, S. (2017). From crisis to a new starting point of reconstruction: A perspective on the Far East and Siberia. In: *Valdai Discussion Club* [online]. 28 November. [Accessed: 09 February 2021]. Available at: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/from-crisis-to-a-new-starting-point/>

to the means employed by Nazi Germany, further contributed to increasing Russian respect for the president⁵¹.

It could be argued that in the period 2012-2016, a process of intermingling between national identity discourse and foreign policy took place as national identity became a first order concern⁵². The political focus shifted to culture as the basis of the 'Russian national idea' and without which it is impossible to secure national interests, with patriotism, moral restoration and religion being the political priorities (with close church-state cooperation)⁵³. Following the 2008 financial crisis and the sanctions imposed as a result of the annexation of Crimea, which undermined the Kremlin's ability to fulfil its part of the social contract, such an approach was reinforced by increased control of the media⁵⁴ and the restriction of human rights in many areas. The current pandemic also serves as a pretext for the introduction of new restrictions that were framed in the new Constitution and complementary amendments⁵⁵.

In search of its place in the international system, Moscow relies on domestic discourses and ideas and reinterprets its history outside global processes and the Atlanticist perspective. Already since the time of Peter the Great the country had defined itself as 'the other', as opposed to the West (and Europe as a whole), represented by the East due to the expansion of the Russian empire in the 19th century. That said, the link between sovereignty and preservation of national identity is emphasised by Putin's assertion that sovereignty and independence in the spheres of spiritual, ideological and foreign policy is an integral part of national character and both globalisation and

51 Trenin, D. (2015).

52 Kremlin (2013). Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club. 19 September [online]. [Accessed: 6 February 2021]. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>

53 In 2014, the decree 'Fundamentals of the New State Policy' was signed, which points to the strengthening of the Russian value system and the establishment of the moral orientation of the individual as the only way to unify the nation. See also Kremlin (2015). Russian National Security Strategy. In: *The Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies* [online]. Pp. 3-22. [Accessed: 18 February 2021]. Available at: <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>

54 Kolesnikov, A. (2021). Obshchestvennyy dogovor 3.0» ['Social Counterpoint 3.0']. In: *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* [online]. 1 May. [Accessed: 8 March 2021]. Available at: <https://carnegie.ru/2017/05/01/ru-pub-69834>; Laruelle, M. (2017). Putin's Regime and the ideological market: A difficult balancing game. In: *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* [online]. 16 March. [Accessed: 14 March 2021]. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/16/putin-s-regime-and-ideological-market-difficult-balancing-game-pub-68250>

55 The authorities' ability to filter and block online content and the «law on undesirable foreign agents and organisations» was expanded, as well as a law prohibiting «disrespect for authorities» and another exempting contractors from environmental impact assessments for «transport infrastructure modernisation projects». There was also a reduction in civic activism due to the banning of protests and politically motivated persecution.

the decadent West pose a threat to the preservation of this and to the security of the country⁵⁶.

Moreover, as already mentioned, the construction of modern national identity is based not only on modern realities, but also on historical ones, such as the idea of regaining the status of a great power and a strong state with military power, as well as Russia as the 'Third Rome' and the saviour of Europe in the two 'patriotic wars'. This leads to the reinterpretation, from a patriotic perspective, of historical memory; examples are the categorisation, following the growing convergence between Russian nationalism, orthodox creed and communist sentiment, of the victims of the gulag as martyrs of Russian uniqueness and superiority⁵⁷, as well as the patriotic reading of Stalin's role in the Second World War⁵⁸. S. Lavrov himself gave an interpretation of the history of the nation, from which the specific value system and shaping of a national identity is derived, which has given rise to a distinct personality; taking into account the history and power, understood from the traditional approach, it is stated that understanding with the West has to go together with the West's recognition of Russia's status as a great power and respect for the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of the country^{59,60}.

Along the same lines, I. Zevelev, conducting a thorough analysis of Russian intellectual circles, argues that such discourse is driven by Moscow's sense of insecurity and the search for securitisation of national identity narratives, which stems from a specific worldview and ideological conceptions⁶¹. In this sense, the historical problems in the West's recognition of Russia as a great power are largely due to differences in governance; weak economic and social foundations mean that the Kremlin has to 'shout' in pursuit of its goals at home and abroad. The promotion of the concepts of *Ruskiy*

56 Kremlin (2014). Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly. 4 December [online]. [Accessed: 6 February 2021]. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>

57 Such an interpretation presents all victims as martyrs who by their sacrifice have contributed to the future collective success of their country. Narratives of nationalism of despair have become ideas of national belonging. See Sniegon, T. (2019). Dying in the Soviet gulag for the future glory of Mother Russia? Making 'patriotic' sense of the gulag in present-day Russia. In: Bernsandt, N. and Törnquist-Plewa, B. (eds.) 2018. Pp. 105-140.

58 According to polls, since the 2000s, the number of critics has fallen to an all-time low: compared to 34% in 1997, only 12% attribute the USSR's heavy human losses during the war to Stalin. See Levada Centre (2017). El número de críticos del papel de Stalin en la guerra disminuyó al mínimo histórico. 22 June [online]. [Accessed: 29 April 2021]. Available at: <https://www.levada.ru/2017/06/22/chislo-kritikov-rol-i-stalina-v-vojne-snzilos-do-istoricheskogo-minimuma/>

59 This stems from the fact that in the Russian mentality the concept of «sovereignty» is closely related to that of 'sovereign equality'. See Trenin (2015).

60 Lavrov, S. (2016). Russia's foreign policy in a historical perspective. In: *Russia in global affairs* [online]. April/June, issue 2. [Accessed: 26 February 2021]. Available at: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russias-foreign-policy-in-a-historical-perspective/>

61 Zevelev, I. (2016).

Mir and Russia as an independent great power opposing the revolutionary forces and liberal ideas imposed by the West, as well as 'foreign adventures' are key to the legitimisation of the regime and securitisation of Russian influence.

Ironically, Putin's advocacy of a Russia in many ways different from the West parallels the actions of many Russian leaders who preceded him⁶². Such efforts to convince Russians that they are different from the West and fighting against malign cultural and geopolitical forces is to show that they are going against the grain. The Kremlin is conducting shock propaganda full of nationalist themes and stereotypes about «enemies» to manipulate public opinion and maintain political control, increasing the sense of external threat and the need for a leader⁶³.

Today, Russia does not fully meet the criteria for claiming great power status. In this vein, it should be noted that the Russian perception of great power identity differs substantially from the Western understanding, especially with regard to soft power⁶⁴, often framed in geopolitical terms, which is understood as anything that is not hard/military power. Yet, after events in Ukraine and Syria undermined Russia's external image, in his claim to great power status Putin, in addition to the traditional elements of power, was introducing forms of soft power such as science, culture and diplomacy. Although the president does not wield as much power as his Soviet predecessors, Russia is also not the weak state it was in the 1990s. Despite negative demographic trends and the rollback of market reforms, it is one of the most powerful countries in the world with military, cyber, economic and ideological power⁶⁵.

Undoubtedly, since 2000, Russia has been making progress in the area of national security. Some intellectuals point out that this trend was reinforced after Crimea's union with the Federation, which created a consensus among Russian elites and population ('post-Crimea consensus') that meant the acceptance of economic hardship by the population in exchange for Russia's status as a global power⁶⁶. Thus, as RT's M. Simonian pointed out, Putin was elected president for the fourth time and became the

62 Galeotti, M. (2020).

63 Baldoni, G. (2016). A theoretical analysis of Russian foreign policy: Changes under Vladimir Putin. In: *E-International Relations* [online], p. 16. [Accessed: 10 February 2021]. Available at: <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/09/10/a-theoretical-analysis-of-russian-foreign-policy-changes-under-vladimir-putin/>

64 See Kisileva, Y. (2015). Russia's soft power discourse: Identity, status and the attraction of power. *Politics* [online]. Political Studies Association, vol. 35(3-4), pp. 322-323. DOI 10.1111/1467-9256.12100. [Accessed: 25 April 2021]. Available at: <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/sites/default/files/Kiseleva-2015-Politics.pdf>

65 Mcfaul, M. (2021).

66 Morozov, A. (2015). Postkrimskiy konsensus [Post-Crimean consensus]. In: *Ruskiy Zhurnal* [online]. 19 January. [Accessed: 29 February 2021]. Available at: <http://www.russ.ru/Mirovaya-povestka/Postkrymskij-konsensus>; Trenin, D. (2015). *Rossiya i mir v XXI veke* [Russia in the 21st century] [online]. Moscow, Eksmo. ISBN 978-5-699-84586-6. [Accessed: 10 March 2021]. Available at: http://loveread.ec/read_book.php?id=51215&p=1

Federation's *'vozhd'*. Although the president has been losing popularity and his grip on power has weakened, the regime is likely to survive through the use of the continuing crisis by exploiting frozen conflicts and disinformation campaigns. Currently, in the context of the pandemic, Russia has already been accused of resorting to disinformation tactics to discredit Western vaccines⁶⁷, while the conflict in Eastern Ukraine is being used to pressure the Biden administration and boost the regime's popularity. The relationship with Western countries continues to be marked by sanctions, cyber interventions, expulsions of diplomats and human rights violations. Both the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) pursue a twin-track policy with Russia, engaging in dialogue on issues of common interest and imposing economic sanctions⁶⁸.

The current confrontation between the West and Russia results in the weakening of the Westernist component within the country, which has been losing its influence since the 'Yeltsin era', which has a negative impact on its relations with the West. It is true that, in the context of the disappearance of borders in the 21st century, the adoption of the postulates of the Slavophile, and especially (neo)Eurasianist, current is logical as it provides a rational alternative to communism, helps to unite all peoples into one nation (although it is questionable from an ethnic perspective) and fits Russian history and geography⁶⁹. Thus, in his speech at the 17th Annual Session of the Valdai Club, the Russian president again underlined the importance of (neo)Eurasianist postulates: a strong state, derived from military power and the will of citizens to delegate broad powers to the elected government, as a basic condition for Russia's security and development; the individuality of the political system and the development path of each country, determined by history, traditions, and moral values; the risks of 'imported democracy'; and that a strong, free and independent civil society is, by definition, sovereign and nationally oriented, patriotic, collectivist, creative, efficient and strong-willed.

In contrast to the idea of M. McFaul⁷⁰, who sees Russia as a revisionist country, the Russian president affirmed the need to preserve the basic mechanisms for the maintenance of international security (UN) but with a corrected institutional structure, and mentioned the positive experiences of regional/international cooperation in which the country has participated (SCO, OPEC+, Astana format, etc.), these being sometimes more productive taking into account the multipolarity of the international system, and the importance of non-intervention of external forces, which are guided by their

67 Cook, L. (2021). La UE acusa a Rusia de diseminar noticias falsas sobre vacuna. *AP News* [online]. 28 April. [Accessed: 30 September 2021]. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/656f452ffc7f932a474dfd3d50c422b2>

68 Colas, X. (2021). The US, UN, and EU amplify sanctions on Russia over the «case Navalny». *El Mundo* [online]. 2 March. [Accessed: 30 September 2021]. Available at: <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2021/03/02/603e4ef321efa094218b4660.html>

69 Kaplan, R. (2015). P. 120.

70 McFaul, M. (2021).

ambitions in a process that affects a certain circle of players who can agree among themselves.⁷¹

As S. Kotkin pointed out, Eurasianism is simply another expression of the perception of uniqueness and messianism that the country has assumed throughout its history: from the concept of 'Third Rome' to the 'Pan-Slavic Kingdom' and from the 'world centre' of Communism to Eurasianism⁷². Still, after the events in Ukraine and in the context of the current pandemic, it can be argued that there is a return to a certain pragmatism with the establishment of the notion of *Greater Eurasia*⁷³ as the flagship of the Russian integration project.

Conclusions

After 1991, Westernist and (neo)Eurasianist currents attempted to respond to Russia's strategic personality dilemmas. While the former was present during Yeltsin's presidency, the latter gained weight with Putin's rise to power.

Such an ideological reorientation is the result of external shocks in the international system, as well as internal shocks in the Russian domestic arena. Even in the face of divergent perceptions of the way forward for the nation, both schools converge on the existence of several fundamental realities that shape the country's strategic personality and have influenced its relationship with the West, although they interpret them from different perspectives: the messianic character of the Russian people and the importance of anthropological and spiritual interests, the recourse to the civilisational basis and the continental factor from which its self-perception as a great power derives.

Similar assumptions are mentioned in the Western literature on Russia's strategic personality, in which a special focus is placed on the civilisational identity that integrates Soviet and imperial elements; the collectivist character of the Russian people; the fear of homogenisation and territorial disintegration; Russia's perception of its role in religion and history, which results in a hierarchical relationship with its 'near abroad'; a permanent search for security, due to its geography, which explains the preference for strong authoritarian rulers as well as its expansionism; and a unique position that leads to the claim of superpower status and explains Russian revisionism.

⁷¹ Kleimans, H. (2020). Putin's speech at the 17th Annual Session of the Valdai Club. *El País* [online]. 26 October. [Accessed: 24 March 2021]. Available at: <https://www.elpaisdigital.com.ar/contenido/discurso-de-putin-en-la-xvii-sesin-anual-del-club-valdi/28791>

⁷² Kotkin, S. (2016). Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern. *Council on Foreign Relations* [online]. May-June 2016, 95 (3), p. 3. [Accessed: 9 June 2021]. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43946851?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

⁷³ China's influence is recognised and is to be mitigated through closer ties with other Asian states.

The early years of the newly created Federation were marked by cooperation with the West, as the country was focused on its internal problems and needed Western assistance for modernisation, and hope for a rapid transition. The euphoria faded due to Russia's internal problems, as well as Western actions that threatened the Kremlin's vital interests. Thus, the geopolitical consensus model was formulated and implemented with the formation of an 'agreement' on Russia's identity as a great power in the context of a multipolar order, based on the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, and the need to form a strong and independent state to maintain order and stability. Also, due to internal threats, during President Putin's first years an attempt was made to create a relationship based on partnership, while the Primakov doctrine was implemented to maintain balance with the West.

Although the period 2009-2012 saw a reset in relations, after 2004 the relationship worsened due to various disagreements and Moscow's subsequent behaviour was presented as a defensive response to Western policies, whose actions further exacerbated Russia's security problems. Such Western behaviour, coupled with Russia's economic improvement, led to a resurgence of nationalist, anti-Western and (neo)Eurasianist ideas. These ideas, and especially (neo)Eurasianist ones, were consolidated during Putin's third term in office, in the context of the country's worsening economic state that led to social protests, which have called into question the continuity of the regime.

A process of intermingling took place between the discourse of national identity and foreign policy as the former became the main concern, with patriotism, moral restoration and religion becoming the political priorities. Moscow drew on domestic discourses and ideas and reinterpreted its history outside global processes and the Atlanticist perspective, formulating the new national identity from modern and historical realities. At the same time, the West and globalisation were branded as threats to the preservation of the country's national identity and security. Thus, the promotion of the concepts of *Ruskiy Mir* and Russia as an independent great power opposing revolutionary forces and Western-imposed liberal ideas, as well as 'foreign adventures' were key to the legitimisation of the regime and securitisation of Russian influence. Still, in the context of worsening relations and the pandemic, recent years have seen a return to a certain pragmatism.

The Kremlin's actions in the global arena are in line with its security concerns. Among them, the loss of power status, which could result in the loss of the country's territorial integrity and political independence, continues to be identified as a vital threat. Such a loss is understood to be due to US hegemonic desires, with the spread of liberal democracy and intervention in the domestic affairs of countries creating dangerous precedents for the stability of the Federation (Kosovo, Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq and Syria) and its influence in the world, and especially in its immediate neighbourhood (colour revolutions). Such internal and external security problems have pushed the Putin regime to reinterpret the country's national identity and pursue a more conservative foreign policy with clear (neo)Eurasianist overtones.

Moreover, while its actions have been presented as responses to Western hegemonic desires, the West has defined the country as revisionist. While it is true that the

country pursues a two-sided policy, Russia, although not directly confrontational, has always disagreed with some dynamics (NATO expansion, military interventions outside the UN and US hegemony) but continues to defend the organisations of the international system, while stressing the need to adjust them to the multipolar order.

Although President Putin has been losing popularity and his grip on power has weakened, the regime is likely to survive through the use of the continuing crisis by exploiting frozen conflicts and disinformation campaigns. Undoubtedly, the current confrontation with the West results in the weakening of the Westernist component within Russia, which was already losing its influence since the 'Yeltsin era', which has a negative impact on its relations with the West. It is likely that the relationship with Western countries will continue to be marked by certain 'clashes' and that both the EU and the US will pursue a twin-track policy with Russia.

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