Russian National Identity and Foreign Policy

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Executive Summary

In 2012–2016, Russian national identity discourse and foreign policy became blended to an extraordinary degree. Moscow began to look for a place in the international system by relying on domestic discourses and “big ideas” emanating from within the country, as well as through reinterpreting Russian history in isolation from world processes. The result has been a seemingly irrational amalgamation of national identity narratives, international security discourses, and domestic security goals. In all three spheres, the Kremlin sees threats coming from the West. Russian foreign policy doctrine today stems more from domestic ideas about Russian identity than from existing conceptualizations of the world order that have developed in the theory and practice of international relations. This has contributed to growing tension in relations between Russia, Western states, and practically all post-Soviet states.

President Vladimir Putin’s policies are certainly deeply rooted in history and tradition. Putin operates in a specific intellectual and political context and often gives voice to the elite consensus on Russia’s role in the world. This consensus holds that the special place of Russia on the global stage is predetermined by unique Russian identity based on its history, size, necessity to protect long borders, and the sense of being a great power and center of a distinct civilization. This identity manifests itself in specific interests and the attribution of particular value to independence and sovereignty. All this would make the attempts to redefine Russian national identity difficult for any Russian leader in the foreseeable future.

This report analyzes how Russia’s domestic discourses on national identity, including beliefs about the self and the world and interpretations of historic legacies, influence foreign policy and why this impact became particularly strong in 2012–2016. It traces the role of domestic narratives in shaping international behavior to enhance our understanding of how and when major foreign policy shifts take place.

Introduction

The recent changes in Russian international behavior surprised both Western policymakers and academics. A growing body of literature addresses questions such as “Who is Mr. Putin really? What is his endgame?” The radical and dramatic shift in Russian policies has been often interpreted as part of Putin’s strategy to preserve his regime. Understanding Vladimir
Putin’s personality and his domestic political goals is necessary, but not sufficient for policymakers to decide how best to craft Russia policy and for academics to understand the drivers of Russian behavior on the international arena. It is essential to look at broader underlying trends.

Putin’s ability to drive Russia’s social and political changes is beyond any doubt. The question is how he does this and why his foreign policy roller-coaster ride became possible. The ease with which Putin has changed Russia’s foreign policy in 2012–2016 cannot be explained by the authoritarian nature of the regime only. This report will look for answers in Russian national identity discourses, particularly in those core elements that shape the parameters of the debates and find their roots and continuity throughout Russian history. Contrary to widespread belief, Putin does not shape national discourses; national discourses shape Vladimir Putin.

Why do states change their international strategies? The field of foreign policy change was almost forgotten after Kalevi Holsti’s inquiry of 1982, refreshed by Walter Carlsnaes, Charles Hermann, Kjell Goldmann, and Jacob Gustavsson in the early 1990s, forgotten once again, and revived anew in 2005 by David Welch.¹ The latter argues that foreign policy is most likely to change dramatically when leaders expect the status quo to generate continued painful losses. The clearest signals of an impending change are desperation, stridency, and distress. At first glance, Welch’s argument does not look relevant to Putin’s Russia, which portrays itself as a proud “great power” that has overcome profound weaknesses and built up its economic, political, and military capabilities. A closer look at the Russian intellectual scene shows, however, that Moscow feels fundamentally insecure and seeks to defend, using all available means, its official national identity narratives.² The drastic transformation of Russia’s foreign policy in recent years was driven by a specific worldview and major ideological conceptions rather than just old-fashioned geopolitical considerations. The events of 2012–2016 brought about fundamental changes in the processes of Russian national identity construction and foreign policymaking. The main feature of Russia’s new foreign policy thinking today is the securitization of identity.

In view of the political and historic narratives that have been dominant in the government’s rhetoric for about two decades, what is puzzling in retrospect is not how dramatically Russian foreign policy changed after 2012, but rather why this did not happen sooner. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a broad range of conceptions about Russia’s identity have surfaced in the official and public discourses, yet in the past several years Russia’s ruling elite eventually opted for ideas that were instrumental in legitimizing the regime, consolidating

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the country’s sovereignty, and securing the strength and influence of the Russian state. Two ideas have proven critical in this context. The first implies that Russia must be a strong and independent great power, a stronghold for all “conservative” forces that oppose revolutions, chaos, and liberal ideas imposed on the world by the United States and Europe. The second idea claims the existence of a greater Russian World (Russkiy mir) that transcends Russia’s state borders, and of a Russian civilization that differs from Western civilization. These ideas do not easily coexist with the dominant Western discourses and have been perceived in the West as intellectually archaic and atavistic. However, the divergence did not pose any immediate danger to the international system or to the European security architecture until March 2014. This explains why Moscow’s actions with regard to Ukraine were completely unexpected for many Western leaders and experts: they had not delved into Russian domestic identity discourses, which had grown increasingly isolated from global trends. Discussions about the new Russian national identity did not have much to do with Russia’s foreign policy or national security agenda until 2012–2014. The mass protests in Russia and revolution in Ukraine allowed (and, from the Kremlin’s perspective, forced) Russia to securitize the question of identity; that is, to make it one of the issues critical for the survival of the Russian nation and statehood.

When Russia dispatched armed forces and tightened its grip on the Crimean Peninsula in late February 2014, Peter Baker reported at The New York Times: “Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany told Mr. Obama by telephone on Sunday that after speaking with Mr. Putin she was not sure he was in touch with reality, people briefed on the call said.” “In another world,” she said. One of the officials added: “What we see here are distinctly 19th- and 20th-century decisions made by President Putin to address problems.” The insight underlines this report’s assumption that there is an essential link between the Russian historic legacies and narratives, including intellectual quest for a national identity, and the present-day specific governmental policies. Mr. Putin may look like he is in “another world,” but it is important to understand what exactly this world is built on and why so many Russians share Putin’s outlook.

The first chapter of this report identifies the intellectual roots and key myths and narratives that inform the present-day Russian worldview and the foundations of foreign policy thinking. The second chapter analyzes the Kremlin’s interpretation of Russian history and national identity and its implications for the present-day Moscow’s strategy. The third section examines the role of the key concepts about Eurasia and a broader world that drive Moscow’s policies today.

National Identity in Russian Intellectual History: Foreign Policy Implications

James Billington once noted that “no nation ever poured more intellectual energy into answering the question of national identity than Russia.” This observation remains true

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4 Ibid.
today. For a century and a half, the debate over the Russian identity, nation formation, and Russia’s future has focused primarily on Russia’s relation to and interaction with the West. Another aspect of equal importance, interactions with the neighboring peoples of Eurasia and the boundaries of the Russian people in this context, has been less conceptualized in the mainstream intellectual tradition. The issue of the Russian people’s borders influences Russia’s relations with neighboring newly independent states and the international security of Eurasia and Europe in general. The events in Ukraine in 2014 have demonstrated that Russia’s relations with the West and the neighboring countries—former Soviet republics—are not separate issues. NATO and EU enlargement, and their growing influence and partnerships in the neighborhood, were interpreted in Moscow as not only the Western infringement of Russia’s geopolitical interests, but a threat to its “civilizational identity” and historic narrative. Russia’s relations with the West and Eurasian countries are seen by the Kremlin and perceived by many Russians as much more than foreign policy and international security issues. They are critical components of the debates about national identity.

This vision is very different from Russia’s understanding of other regions of the world. For example, Moscow’s view of Asian countries, including China, is far more removed from Russia’s perceptions of self, and is based rather on foreign policy and economic calculations. This asymmetry in perceptions of leading international actors reflects and influences Russia’s foreign policy in ways that may hinder its adaptation to fundamental changes in the international arena.

The roots of the current discussion on Russian identity can be traced back to the nineteenth-century debates between Slavophiles and Westernizers. Slavophiles emphasized the unique character of the Russian civilization, based on Slavic Orthodox communitarian traditions. It was opposed to alien Western civilization, based on Slavic Orthodox communitarian traditions. It was opposed to alien Western civilization, with its alleged rationalism and faceless codified law. In contrast, the Westernizers argued that Russia should emulate and learn from the rationalism of the West. The problems of the Russian Empire’s multiethnicity, interactions between Russians and other peoples, and the frontiers of the Russian people played no significant role in these debates, establishing a tradition for many Russian intellectuals. Characteristically, the specific problems of Russia’s national minorities were first raised in a relatively consistent theoretical manner not in the intellectual salons of St. Petersburg or Moscow, but in Kiev, by the Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Led by a Ukrainian poet and public figure, Taras Shevchenko, and a Russian student of Ukrainian history, Nicholas Kostomarov in 1846, these debates could hardly countenance the separation of Slavs. In fact, Shevchenko and Kostomarov elaborated the idea of a pan-Slavic federation of liberal states, including Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Bohemia, Serbia, and Bulgaria. (Nobody defined present-day Belarus as something distinct in those days.)

In 1869, Nicholas Danilevsky, in his Russia and Europe, tried to fuse Slavophilism, pan-Slavism, and a policy of imperialism. Essentially, Danilevsky recast the liberal pan-Slavic idea in conservative imperialist thought. Slavic culture, in Danilevsky’s view, could serve as a basis

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6 The following brief overview of Russian intellectual history is partly based on material in Igor Zevelev, Russia and Its New Diasporas (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2001).
7 Nikolai Danilevskii, Rossiya i Evropa [Russia and Europe] (St. Petersburg: Glagol, 1995).
for Russian leadership of a newly created federation of Slavic peoples whose capital would be in Constantinople.

There was one more significant intellectual development in the nineteenth century that left an important imprint on later discussions: the idea of the “universal” character of the Russian identity. Started by Slavophiles, this idea was developed by Feodor Dostoevsky, who wrote in his famous 1880 sketch on Pushkin: “For what else is the strength of the Russian national spirit than the aspiration, in its ultimate goal, for universality and all-embracing humanitarianism?”8 In his deliberations, Dostoevsky, like both Slavophiles and Westerners, referred only to Europe: “Yes, the Russian’s destiny is incontestably all-European and universal. To become a genuine and all-around Russian means, perhaps (and this you should remember), to become brother of all men, a universal man, if you please.”9

It could be argued that Dostoevsky expressed with remarkable passion some important features of Russian national consciousness: its openness, inclusiveness, and messianism. While Danilevsky drew boundaries, though broad ones, Dostoevsky went beyond them; Dostoevsky admired Pushkin for his ability to understand and include the entire European culture into the Russian soul.

Universalism of Dostoevsky was further developed by Vladimir Solovyov. While harshly criticizing Danilevsky for his particularism,10 Solovyov himself paradoxically endorsed Russian imperial policy. Writing about the addition of formerly Polish lands to Russia by Catherine the Great, he argued that “Russia acted here not as a nation, which conquered and suppressed the others, but as a superior force of peace and truth, which gave every nation what it was entitled to.”11 For Solovyov, justification of imperial policy was its Christian, or universalistic, character. He argued that the behest of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great to Russia was: “Be faithful to yourself and your national peculiarity, so be universal.”12 Nikolai Berdyaev wrote that Solovyov believed that Russians were the people of the future, because they would resolve all the problems that the West was incapable of addressing.13 Solovyov strongly believed that Russia’s mission was universal and unifying, not particularistic and exclusive. The boundaries of the people in this context are practically limitless.

Russian culture was formed throughout the past three centuries within an imperial framework. “Universalism” (vselenskost’) became the key feature of Russian “high culture.” On the one hand, it helped the Russian culture to gain worldwide recognition. Far from being “provincial” or “narrow-minded,” it easily absorbed the achievements of other, particularly European, cultures and made outstanding contributions to humankind. On the other hand, the attempts to include everyone culturally and otherwise into a limitless, “universal” Russia

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9 Ibid., 49.
12 Ibid.
have been in constant conflict with particular aspirations of neighboring peoples, who largely did not want to become “universal,” seeing Russification behind such “universalism” and perceiving it as a threat to their existence. Historical and cultural messianic traditions stand in sharp contrast to the new geopolitical situation in which Russia finds itself today.

Russian policy in the nineteenth century, however, was driven not so much by these ideas about Russian culture per se, but by the doctrine of “official nationalism,” formulated by Count Sergei Uvarov. Orthodoxy, autocracy, and “nationality” were proclaimed the pillars of the empire. The third principle, “nationality” (narodnost’), was the most ambiguous, especially after the Polish revolt of 1830 and the nationalization of ethnic groups in the second half of the century. This was a subject for different theoretical and political interpretations.

The Russian intellectual elite, while responding to the nationalization process, usually lagged behind the developments among the non-Russians, who had already constructed collective mental boundaries between themselves and Russians in the second half of the nineteenth century. Slavophiles and Westerners, Danilevsky, Dostoevsky, Uvarov, and others, were concerned with the Russians’ relation to Europe, Slavic unity, and the universe, but not to other peoples within the empire. In their minds, the “Little Russians” (Ukrainians), the “White Russians” (Belorussians), and the “Great Russians” (ethnic Russians) comprised one Russian people, while all others (inorodtsy) were practically excluded from the theoretical discourse. Evidently, it was a mistake to ignore the developments in the empire’s Western part, most of all in Poland at that time, where national consciousness was becoming stronger.

An important, though often overrated, contribution to the debate on Russian identity was made by the Eurasians, a group of young intellectual emigres (Pyotr Savitsky, Nikolai Trubetskoy, Georgi Frolovsky, Pyotr Suvchinsky, and others) in the 1920s. Unlike the Slavophiles, they went beyond their Slavic roots in search of the basis for the Russian nation. Arguing that Turkic and Finno-Ugric elements played a key role as well, they were the first to incorporate non-Slavic peoples into the discourse on the identity of Russians. According to them, Eurasia was cemented by a common geographic space and self-consciousness; it was neither European nor Asian, it was Eurasian. Though the Eurasians differed significantly from other thinkers in many respects, they continued the tradition of a nonethnic definition of Russianness.

The Bolsheviks seemed to be the party that devoted the greatest attention to the “nationality question.” The most important features of their view was the declaration of the Russian empire as a “prison of the peoples,” the denunciation of “Great Russian chauvinism,” and a proclamation of the right for self-determination for all the peoples of the country. Contrary to these principles, Bolsheviks gradually recreated the highly centralized state within borders similar to those of the empire. The price they paid was the suppression of Russian ethnic nationalism and the creation of ethno-territorial units of different levels of autonomy for the non-Russians.

When the goal of a world socialist revolution was postponed indefinitely, concessions to nationalities within the Soviet Union became lasting rather than temporary. Centralized party rule was a critical counterbalance to this ethnonational federal system. As the influence of the party began to diminish under Gorbachev, the state simultaneously began to collapse.

Prominent British historian of Russia Geoffrey Hosking wrote that “Britain had an empire, but Russia was an empire and perhaps still is.” The collapse of the Soviet Union meant much more for Russia than just the loss of colonies. It was a loss of identity. Political, historical, cultural, ethnic boundaries, as well as a subjective mental map held by most Russians, share no congruence. There have been no clear and historically consistent criteria for distinguishing “we” from “they” in the Russian consciousness. Confusion over the boundaries of the Russian people has been the major factor of Eurasia’s historical development for at least three hundred years. This phenomenon has enormous and contradictory implications for current issues of stability, security, and peace in the region.

This brief overview of historic intellectual legacies regarding Russia’s interactions with the West and nonethnic Russians within and along the changing borders of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union may be summarized as follows.

First, self-styled exceptionalism with messianic elements has become an essential part of Russian national identity that may be explicit or subdued, depending on circumstances. Many Russians felt that they belonged to an entity, which was bigger and more important than just an ethnic group or a nation. Russian intellectuals tended to define their distinctiveness not in terms of an ethnic group with its peculiar songs, dances, or food; not in terms of a nation with its sovereign political institutions; but in terms of a civilization with a special set of values and attitudes, distinct “spirituality” and “universalism.” During the Soviet period, Dostoevsky’s “universalism” of Russians took a new, Marxist form, while remaining practically the same in its essence: diluting their ethnic and national identity in broader humanitarian or social missions. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this set of ideas took the form of the concept of the Russian civilization.

Second, Russia’s interactions with Europe and later with “the West” as a whole have been absolutely central for national identity construction. For a century and a half, the elite has tended to define Russia in opposition to Europe as a whole, not to particular European peoples, for example Germans or French.

Third, perception of the neighboring peoples, territories, and states that have ever been a part of the Russian Empire, has been essentially inconsistent and ambiguous. The Russian intellectual elite of the nineteenth to early twentieth century mostly failed to properly address the problem of multiethnicity in the Russian imperial “nation” and the place of ethnic Russians in the state as something of crucial significance. After the Soviet collapse, Russians had hard time to recognize the neighboring newly independent states, Ukraine and Belarus in particular, as separate nations.

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Russian intellectual history has surprisingly strong impact on the present-day foreign policy. It has shaped continued preoccupation with the West as the Other who is dissimilar to and the opposite of the Self. The post-Soviet space is seen primarily as a battleground for power and influence between Russia on the one hand and the United States, NATO, and Europe on the other hand. Western policies toward Eurasia since the collapse of the Soviet Union have only strengthened Russian anxieties. Moscow is confident that the main goal of the United States and Europe in Eurasia is blocking any Russian attempt to develop as a regional hegemonic power. These Western policies are seen as an attempt to deny Russia its distinct identity and historic mission.

National Identity in Russia's Global Strategy in Putin's Third Term

Intellectual history has not provided contemporary thinkers and politicians with adequate tools for assessing how Russia's age-old quandary fits in a new geopolitical situation. A new Russia began to define its identity from the ground up in 1991–1992; at first, it looked as if little from its past could be applied to the new situation. Due to various historical factors, Russians emerged from the Soviet Union as an incomplete, under-articulated nation with a surprisingly low level of national consciousness, lack of a mass-based national movement, and blurred vision of its own political boundaries. The situation was not entirely different from that in 1917, when Russian prominent political thinker and philosopher Petr Struve wrote: "The collapse of the monarchy, after a brief period of general shock, showed the extreme weakness of national consciousness in the very core of the Russian state, among masses of the Russian people."16

The issues of national identity were perceived as intellectually and politically important only by nationalists throughout 1992–2011. Post-Soviet liberals, communists, and centrists-pragmatists, like their predecessors in early twentieth century, largely ignored these issues. Only after returning to the Kremlin to start his third term in 2012 did Vladimir Putin address these questions in earnest. He did it in the context of the effort to restore Russian power on the global arena. From Putin’s perspective, power and influence “depend on whether the citizens of a given country consider themselves a nation, to what extent they identify with their own history, values and traditions, and whether they are united by common goals and responsibilities. In this sense, the question of finding and strengthening national identity really is fundamental for Russia.”17

Characteristically, in this important speech at the meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club in 2013, the president was talking about finding national identity of the country for which he was a third-term president. That speech opened a series of public statements and speeches, as well as off-the-record conversations devoted to the issue of preserving Russian identity in a rapidly changing world. Throughout 2013–2016, they have revealed a high level of the Kremlin’s anxiety about cohesion of the Russian nation and grave

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threats it faces on the global arena. They also have demonstrated that Russian national identity is no longer an abstract academic subject, but a security and foreign policy concern. President Putin, as well as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who joined the official narrative-producing effort, has developed an official discourse that surely reflects the formation of a specific worldview based on the Kremlin’s interpretation of Russia’s history and national identity. This worldview has deep roots in Russian intellectual history.

From Putin’s perspective, “Russia’s history forms the foundation for our country’s worldview and culture in the broad sense of the word. It is unquestionably a source of our identity and our mission as a civilisation.”18 Russian language and literature are viewed in the Kremlin as the tools to preserve national identity, “what makes us unique, our own character and traditions . . . the historic continuity and the links between the different generations . . . for Russians this is a question of being and remaining Russian.”19

The narrative the Kremlin produces is neither a wholesale historic revisionism, nor a deliberate distortion of the true historic record. It is rather an intellectual and political response to mounting internal and international challenges. The narrative reflects, in part, how President Putin views his own place in Russian history and what his legacy, including foreign policy legacy, should look like.

The Kremlin’s historical thinking does not allow for multiple perspectives; there are only truths and falsifications. The official account emphasizes continuity of Russian history; Soviet Russia is much like Imperial Russia. Nothing essential has ever changed, only “names and years.”20 Unchanging and unchangeable Russia in this account should make its own independent journey through history. The possibility of “the disruption of traditions and the consonance of history” are viewed as existential threats.21 The most stable elements are “cultural and historical codes,” “cultural matrix,” “genes,” and Russian “ethnos,” whatever these questionable terms may mean. Another constant feature of history in this narrative is the centuries-old Western policy of containment of Russia.

Putin proclaimed independence and sovereignty to be ultimate values. This is not unusual, though not so common in Europe in the twenty-first century. What is rare is a strong rhetorical emphasis on the link between sovereignty and preservation of national identity: “The desire for independence and sovereignty in spiritual, ideological and foreign policy spheres is an integral part of our national character.”22 A year later, Putin was even more dramatic and explicit: “Either we remain a sovereign nation, or we dissolve without a trace and lose our identity.”23

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21 Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, September 19, 2013.
22 Ibid.
In this discourse, the main threat to Russian national identity is twofold: globalization and a decadent West. In Putin’s universe, preservation of national identity as a major foreign policy goal becomes even more critical in view of the infectious degradation of the West: a “serious challenge to Russia’s identity is linked to events taking place in the world. Here there are both foreign policy and moral aspects. We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan.”

An important aspect of the Russian official rhetoric since 2013 has been a particular emphasis on the deep historical roots of animosity between Russia and the West. In his “Crimea speech” on March 18, 2014, Putin clearly stated, “we have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, continues today.” Confirming that this is a major assumption that drives Russia’s attitude toward the West, Putin repeated the same postulation two years later: “The policy of containment was not invented yesterday. It has been carried out against our country for many years, always, for decades, if not centuries.”

Following Dostoevsky’s and Solovyov’s messianic ideas about the essentially panhuman nature of Russians who always strive for universal harmony, Putin proclaims that “We will protect the diversity of the world.” According to Putin, “This is our conceptual outlook, and it follows from our own historical destiny and Russia’s role in global politics. Our present position has deep historical roots. Russia itself has evolved on the basis of diversity, harmony and balance, and brings such a balance to the international stage.”

All these historic narratives allowed Putin to justify the annexation of Crimea not only in geopolitical terms, but in “spiritual” terms of sacral meanings: “It was an event of special significance for the country and the people, because Crimea is where our people live, and the peninsula is of strategic importance for Russia as the spiritual source of the development of a multifaceted but solid Russian nation and a centralised Russian state. It was in Crimea, in the ancient city of Chersonesus or Korsun, as ancient Russian chroniclers called it, that Grand Prince Vladimir was baptised before bringing Christianity to Rus.” It is clear that the presidential address was drafted mainly by ideologues. Foreign policy experts would not probably sign off on its extremely controversial references to essentially contested Jerusalem: “Crimea, the ancient Korsun or Chersonesus, and Sevastopol have invaluable civilisational and even sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for the followers of Islam and Judaism.”

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24 Ibid.
27 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, December 4, 2014.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
Under unwritten rules of Russian politics, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had to make a contribution to the discussion initiated by the president because Putin’s deliberations on national identity and history of Russia had such a strong foreign policy component. Lavrov started producing his narratives of history and national identity to supplement Putin’s ideas. These narratives have explained, justified, and motivated Russian foreign policy since 2012. The president, of course, continues to set the main parameters of Russia’s international strategy.

In 2016, Lavrov put his signature under the most unusual article ever attributed to a Russian foreign minister titled “Russia’s Foreign Policy: Historical Background.” It provides an excellent glimpse into the framework of current Russian foreign policy, its philosophical foundations, and general worldview of the Russian elite. It does not matter if individual members of the Russian officialdom sincerely believe in concrete postulates of this philosophy. What matters is that they feel obliged to develop and implement their policies in a way that would not contradict the main narrative.

Relying on intellectual legacy of the most conservative Russian thinkers of the nineteenth century, including the Slavophiles, Konstantin Leontiev and Nikolay Danilevsky, and adding questionable terminology, Lavrov argues that Russia is fundamentally different from the West. According to Lavrov, “Russian people possessed a cultural matrix of their own and an original type of spirituality and never merged with the West.” Developing Putin’s argument about an existential threat of losing Russian national identity, Lavrov points to the source of this threat, the European West that has attempted “to put Russian lands under full control and to deprive Russians of their identity.” Lavrov praises Russia’s centuries-old resistance to these attempts invoking, once again, an extremely controversial concept: “I am confident that this wise and forward-looking policy is in our genes.”

This brief overview of the present-day role of national identity conceptualization in historic context and its global strategy implications may be summarized as follows. First, the Kremlin sees modern Russia as a unique great power with a mission. From this perspective, the country’s international status and prestige may be achieved not only through military might, political influence, and a traditional balance of power strategy. Russia’s global role in the twenty-first century is seen as an entitlement predetermined by its intangible messianic spiritual and cultural status. In fact, Putin has revived a tradition of self-styled Russian exceptionalism that developed in the nineteenth century.

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31 There are two different translations of the article. One is on the Foreign Ministry’s site: “Sergey Lavrov’s article ‘Russia’s Foreign Policy: Historical Background’ for ‘Russia in Global Affairs’ magazine,” March 3, 2016, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE028w/content/id/2124391. Another one is on the journal’s site: Sergey Lavrov, “Russia’s Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective,” Russia in Global Affairs, March 30, 2016 http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Russias-Foreign-Policy-in-a-Historical-Perspective-18067. In this report, the ministry’s translation is used for citation purposes.

32 “Sergey Lavrov’s article ‘Russia’s Foreign Policy: Historical Background’ for ‘Russia in Global Affairs’ magazine,” March 3, 2016.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.
Second, the overarching, imaginary "West" began to be perceived in Russia as a power that tries to change Russia’s unique and increasingly conservative national identity, including patriotism, traditional gender roles, Orthodox Christianity, and the role of the national leader.

The imaginary "West," in the Kremlin’s interpretation, now has not only NATO as a tool of expansion (including potential expansion into Ukraine), but also the EU’s foreign policy. If before the expansion the EU’s influence was not perceived as a threat, in 2009, with the introduction of the Eastern Partnership program, Moscow began to see the EU’s political agenda as a way of creating and widening a rift between Russia and its neighbors. Moscow reacted harshly to the EU’s refusal to take into consideration Russia’s interests during talks over the Association Agreement with Ukraine. Since 2012, Europe as a cultural concept and the European Union as an institution have been increasingly portrayed by the Russian official propaganda machine as an immoral actor that corrupts Eurasia by promoting same-sex marriages, liberal migration policy, and tolerance, all viewed in an extremely negative way.

Third, Russia’s relations with other post-Soviet states are increasingly influenced by the Kremlin’s interpretation of history, not by factors that are customary for maintaining international relations, such as economic interests and traditional security considerations. Three concepts, namely compatriots, the Russian World, and greater Russian civilization, started playing a bigger role in Moscow’s policies toward neighboring countries in 2014–2016.

The Concepts of Compatriots, the Russian World, and Russian Civilization

The ideas about protection of Russian compatriots, the existence of the Russian World, and the Russian civilization practically converged within Russian political vocabulary in 2014–2016, forming a nationalist narrative about the necessity of Russia’s revival as a great power and its revanche in the post-Soviet space. Despite its newfound prominence, these articulations and the fundamental questions they raise are not entirely new issues. As noted earlier, for at least the last 300 years, the relationship between Russia and the Western civilization, as well as ambiguity over the boundaries that define the Russian people, have been major factors in Eurasia’s historical development. However, there have been no clear or historically consistent criteria for distinguishing “us” from “them” in the collective Russian national consciousness. Political, historical, cultural, and ethnic boundaries, as well as the entirely subjective mental maps that guide the thinking of most Russians, share no congruence, and the definitions of these boundaries are in constant motion and open to persistent debate.

The concepts of “compatriots abroad” and the “Russian World” have evolved within two different yet overlapping discourses. Each of these concepts has its own intellectual history. However, these ideas have something in common. Basically they both reflect the tension
between actual Russian Federation state borders and the mental maps of “Russianness” that exist in the minds of many Russians.\(^{35}\)

In 1992, President Boris Yeltsin and Andrei Kozyrev, Russia’s first foreign minister, introduced the term “compatriots abroad” into the political lexicon. The term refers to individuals who live outside the borders of the Russian Federation itself yet feel that they have a historical, cultural, and linguistic linkage with Russia. These people want to preserve these ties no matter the present status of their citizenship. Since 1994, the concept has developed into a concrete state policy, manifesting itself in a series of laws and state programs, as well as through some foreign policy decisions.

Although it had previously been articulated by President Vladimir Putin, the concept of the “Russian World” only began to penetrate the political discourse in 2007. This concept has broad philosophical connotations and is much more expansive than the term “compatriots.” While the latter is based on legal norms and definitions, the Russian World is an idea defined purely on the basis of self-identification.

The debates on Russian nationhood in modern Russia have gone beyond state boundaries. Establishing special relations with compatriots might be viewed as an attempt to extend Russia’s political space, but Russia lacked the resources and political will to become truly assertive in this field in the 1990s–early 2000s. However, the perception of the post-Soviet space as something not yet totally separated from Russia remained strong.

The revolution in Ukraine in 2013–2014 was perceived in Moscow as a coup d’état organized by the West on the territory that is the most important part of Moscow’s exclusive zone of interests and responsibility, and that is crucial for Russia’s national identity. In Putin’s words, “with Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line. . . . After all, they were fully aware that there are millions of Russians living in Ukraine and in Crimea. . . . Russia found itself in a position it could not retreat from. If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard.”\(^{36}\)

On March 7, 2014, Dmitry Peskov, the current press attaché for the president of the Russian Federation, commented on the situation in Crimea by stating President Vladimir Putin is a guarantor of security for the “Russian World.”\(^{37}\) This statement reflected a fundamental change in official interpretations of the Kremlin’s zone of responsibility in questions of security; we see a shift from security at the nation-state level to security at the level of a vague community larger than the nation-state. This community has essentially ambiguous boundaries. This approach has deep roots in Russian history and self-identification, as it was


argued above, and is reflected in intellectual legacies of the Slavophiles, Vladimir Solovyov and many other thinkers of the nineteenth century.

In post-Soviet Russian politics there emerged two main approaches to handling the question of a divided population that identifies itself with Russia but lives beyond its new borders. The first approach has manifested itself in a halfhearted state policy toward compatriots residing abroad, and in the government’s concept of the Russian World. Until 2014, this policy and the concept were framed mostly as a wary answer to the issue of post-Soviet border changes and new citizenships on the post-Soviet space.38

The second approach can be seen in nationalist rhetoric about a “divided Russian people.” This rhetoric had no outlet in specific policy decisions for many years after the Soviet collapse, yet such claims made an appearance in political elites’ speeches in 2014. If we zoom out to the formation of Russian identity over the course of 200 years, then we can say, with a high degree of generalization, that the two aforementioned approaches to the “Russian question” reflect a duality that has been typical for Russian history—namely, the duality of a nation-state and ethnic-national approach to the national identity construction.

During the events of spring of 2014, Russian officials at first eschewed talking directly about a “divided Russian people” as a means to legitimize the Kremlin’s actions. This taboo was lifted by Putin during his address on March 18, 2014, in which he claimed that as the Soviet Union collapsed, “the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders.”39

Several years before the concepts of compatriots and the Russian World where securitized by the Kremlin as the Ukrainian crisis was unfolding, the Kremlin came to the conclusion the concepts of compatriots and the Russian World were too narrow for Russia’s positioning on the world arena as a great power. In 2008 representatives of the Russian government, for the first time since the breakup of the Soviet Union, began to speak of a large supranational project, as categories of civilizational belonging seeped more and more into foreign policy thought. This stemmed not from the idea of a “divided Russian people” and their relationship with neighboring peoples, but rather from the deterioration of relations with the West. Russia’s failure to become a part of the “greater West” and politicians’ realizations that this failure may be a longer-term problem resulted in the need for Moscow to reevaluate the kind of place it can hold on the international arena. The desire of Russian politicians to claim great-power status led them to seek to formulate foreign policy goals in terms that went beyond nation-state interests.40


The concept of “civilization” proved ideologically handy for the political elites of the Russian Federation. The idea of civilization does not easily align with liberal conceptions of globalization and universal democratic values. In the nineteenth century conservatives had addressed the question of the unique place of Russian civilization, most notably thinkers Nicholas Danilevsky (see above) and Konstantin Leontiev. In line with these thinkers, the theme of geopolitical and spiritual battle between Russian and Western civilizations can be found in the writings of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Gennadi Zyuganov. Likewise, Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin had claimed that Russia is a civilization rather than a nation.

The Russian government formulated two possible approaches to the question of Russia’s civilizational belonging. One approach was voiced by President Dmitry Medvedev during his speech in Berlin in June 2008: “The end of the Cold War made it possible to build up genuinely equal cooperation between Russia, the European Union and North America as three branches of European civilization.” This approach implied the reconciliation of the conservative understanding of civilization with liberal principles, which at that time began to reemerge in official Russian discourses. It was in line with the tradition set by the Westernizers in the mid-nineteenth century (see above). Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, echoing the idea of “three branches of European civilization,” nevertheless noted that accepting Western values is only one possible way to go. In his words, Russia would follow a different path, dictated by a situation where “competition is becoming truly global and acquiring a civilizational dimension; that is, the subjects of competition now include values and development models.”

It seems that the Russian government didn’t see a big contradiction between the two approaches to the question of Russia’s civilizational belonging. They were not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. One approach addressed the West, when the attitude was still reasonable and constructive; the other was directed at neighboring states and compatriots. Yet over time, there became less and less room on the Russian intellectual arena for interpreting Russian civilization as a “branch” of Western civilizations. The concept of Russia as a separate civilization was more in line with new conservative ideology and offered a rebuttal to criticism of Russia’s lack of democracy. Even so, until 2014 the “Russian question” had only a moderate official “answer”: Russian civilization was depicted as the Russian state together with the Russian World, which includes all those who identify themselves with Russian culture.

Since February 2014, the concept of the Russian World and greater Russian civilization, for Russia, became implements with which to problematize existing political boundaries in Eurasia. In 2014, following a period of dramatic change in Ukraine, Moscow effectively pivoted to the pursuit of the radical nationalist agenda in the annexation of Crimea and the initiation of the Novorossiya project that sought to dismember Ukraine. More recently, following failure in eastern Ukraine, Moscow has tried to return to moderation in its relations with the Russian World; however, a return to the policy course of 1992 to 2013 has become

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nearly impossible due to the high level of awareness and heightened sensitivity toward the new "Russian question" among the governments of neighboring states.

The policy toward compatriots and the concept of the Russian World were conceived as tools to allow Moscow to simultaneously honor post-Soviet borders and address the concerns of those who did not perceive them as fully legitimate. In 2014, this rhetoric was put to different purposes, namely the justification for the annexation of sovereign territory and support for separatists in a neighboring country. The Russian World became the conceptual framework that both stimulated and justified Russia's new approach. The concept of the Russian World allows Moscow to keep boundaries vague, at least rhetorically, with uncertain consequences for the regional security.

Conclusion

This brief overview of the key concepts that have guided Russia's policy in Eurasia demonstrates that exceptionalism and messianic traditions characteristic of its national identity have taken the form of the concept of Russian civilization. The Western policies of engagement with the Eurasian countries have been seen in Moscow as meddling on the territory of the Russian World. Having annexed Crimea, Putin demonstrated that the present-day political divisions of the post-Soviet landscape are not the incontrovertible result of the Belavezha Accords, but rather a starting point for a complex and unpredictable process that began in 1991 and continues to this day.

In summary, after the end of the Cold War and as a consequence of the failure to get included into European and transatlantic security architecture, Moscow began to look for a place in the international system by relying on domestic discourses and "big ideas" emanating from within the country, as well as through reinterpreting Russian history in isolation from world processes. By 2012–2016, Moscow managed to plunge deep into irrational amalgamations of national identity discourses, international security discourses, and domestic stability goals. In all three spheres, the Kremlin sees threats coming from the West. Russian foreign policy doctrine today stems more from domestic ideas about Russian identity than from existing conceptualizations of the world order that have developed in the theory and practice of international relations. Russia's perceptions have formed in isolation from the rest of the world. In 2012–2016, a remarkable spillover of Russian national identity debates into foreign policy took place. This has created dangerous tension in relations between Russia, Western states and practically all post-Soviet states. If Russia continues to craft its foreign policy as a function of its own existential search for an identity, Russia will run the risk of missing important opportunities and overlooking grave threats. The rise of a new brand of conservatism among Russia’s political elites is likely to follow this dangerous pattern and get in the way of developing realistic and flexible policies toward the United States, Europe, and Eurasia.

It is possible to identify several "big ideas" in Russian intellectual history that have been adopted by the Kremlin as a foundation of its worldview. They include firm belief in Russian exceptionalism, denial of the European nature of Russian civilization, portrayal of the West as evil, and conviction that Russia has a special civilizational and spiritual mission among the
neighboring peoples of Eurasia. These ideas have deep roots in the centuries-old debates over Russian identity.\textsuperscript{43}

Many of the official Russian narratives rest not on the whims of political leaders, but on deeply ingrained perceptions of many intellectuals and ordinary Russians. People construct, negotiate, manipulate, and affirm a response to the demand for a collective identity.\textsuperscript{44} National identities, as they are formulated at a given moment by the relative consensus within the elites, set certain limits to what can or cannot be done by policymakers. Political leaders can imply pragmatism only within those limits.

Today, the key domestic discourses that, on the one hand, shape Russian national identity and, on the other hand, may drive its foreign policy, are the following:

- The enduring belief that Russia is a Great Power and must be treated as such on the international arena.
- The belief in the existence of a greater Russian civilization that is different from the Western civilization.
- The tension between actual Russian Federation state borders and the mental maps of “Russianness” that exist in the minds of many Russians.
- The essentially ambiguous set of ideas about the post-Soviet space. The image and character of the neighboring states is constructed in many different ways in Russia. They are presented simultaneously as independent states, culturally close and even “fraternal” countries, parts of historic Russia, as potential members of a hostile military alliance (NATO), or as the states illegally holding pieces of land belonging to Russia. All of these conflicting visions coexist in the public and political discourses—and the policymakers employ many of them simultaneously with a remarkable ease.

Collective national identities do change over time. However, in spite of the tectonic domestic and geopolitical shifts that took place when the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia’s identity transformation has been surprisingly slow. The density of international interactions between Russia and the West remained thin and institutionalization of these contacts were embryonic throughout a hundred years, starting in 1917. This makes

\textsuperscript{43} Characteristically, the Kremlin has chosen not the complex legacy of deep thinkers of the nineteenth century as its ideological reference point, but the twentieth-century writings of Ivan Ilyin, an extremely conservative publicist with allegedly fascist leanings. Ilyin did not develop new original perspectives, but effectively summarized the most conservative, reactionary ideas from Russian intellectual history. His collected works, banned in the Soviet Union, have been republished in two dozen volumes in Russia and his remnants were repatriated from Switzerland. Russian filmmaker and conservative activist Nikita Mikhalkov has allegedly brought Ilyin’s legacy from the abyss (see Anton Barbashin and Hannah Thoburn, “Putin’s Philosopher. Ivan Ilyin and the Ideology of Moscow’s Rule,” \textit{Foreign Affairs}, September 20, 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2015-09-20/putins-philosopher. Vladimir Putin often quotes Ilyin. As a result, quotes from Ivan Ilyin have become almost mandatory for any Russian official’s remarks or publication if they address historical background of current policies. See, for example, “Sergey Lavrov’s article ‘Russia’s Foreign Policy: Historical Background’ for ‘Russia in Global Affairs’ magazine,” March 3, 2016.

\textsuperscript{44} See Bill McSweeney, \textit{Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 77–78.
national collective identity, especially its domestic components, particularly rigid. Today, the Russian ideological discourse has narrowed and moved toward self-styled conservatism.

There is a consensus within Russian elite that the special place of Russia on the global stage is predetermined by unique Russian identity based on its history, size, nuclear weapons, necessity to protect long borders, and the sense of being a great power and center of a distinct civilization. This identity manifests itself in specific interests and the attribution of particular value to independence and sovereignty that may be only natural for a country with a longer-than-thousand-year history as a political entity. All this would make the attempts to redefine Russian national identity extremely difficult for any Russian leader in the foreseeable future.
About the Author

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Russian National Identity and Foreign Policy

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