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The Russian World Boundaries

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**Russia’s National Identity Transformation and New Foreign Policy Doctrine**

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Resume Until spring 2014, discussions about the new Russian national identity, including the Russian world concept, had little to do with Russia’s foreign policy and national security agenda. The revolution in Ukraine made it one of the issues critical for the survival of the Russian nation and statehood.

Russia’s incorporation of Crimea in March 2014 is a manifestation of the changes post-Soviet Russian national identity has undergone over the last two years. These changes signal a dramatic revision in Russia’s foreign policy doctrine. Moscow’s actions with regard to Ukraine were, in fact, not unexpected. Indeed, they came as a logical outcome of the political and ideological shift that began in the fall of 2011 when Vladimir Putin announced his decision to return as Russian president.

The events of spring 2014 force us to look beyond the framework of conventional foreign policy analysis, since the political theory of “realism,” popular with Russian policymakers, appears insufficient to explain the Kremlin’s decisions in recent months. Moscow has taken great risks and the decisions may eventually jeopardize its relations with the U.S., Europe, and its neighbors in the post-Soviet space. To understand the reasons behind the Kremlin’s extraordinary moves in March 2014, it is important to consider the conceptual framework within which the Russian government had to act. This framework suggests that Moscow’s political moves were not only logical, but also actually unavoidable.

U.S. analyst Robert Jervis drew attention to the role images and perceptions play in world politics, thereby laying the foundation for a new understanding of political science. This article is based on two conclusions drawn by Jervis. Firstly, Jervis discovered that “it is often impossible to explain crucial decisions and policies without reference to the decision-makers’ beliefs about the world and their images of others.” The most important question for Jervis was not who is right and who is wrong, but why people’s perceptions of the world differ. Secondly, Jervis claimed that “people’s perceptions of the world and of other actors differ from reality that we can detect and for reasons that we can understand.”

In the last two decades a broad range of conceptions about Russia’s post-Soviet identity have surfaced, yet in the past two years the Russian ruling elite eventually opted for ideas that were instrumental in legitimizing the regime, consolidating the country’s sovereignty, and securing the strength and influence of the Russian state. Two ideas have proven to be 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 U.S. and Europe. The second one claims the existence of a greater “Russian world” (“Russky mir”) that transcends Russia’s state borders, and of a Russian civilization that differs from Western civilization. These ideas did not easily coexist with the dominant Western discourse and were perceived in the West as intellectually archaic. 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 most Western leaders and experts: they had not delved into Russian domestic identity discourse, which had grown increasingly isolated from global trends.

Russia’s decisions in February and March 2014 were prompted by a specific worldview and major ideological conceptions rather than simple geopolitical considerations of territorial expansion. In this context it is worth recollecting the shifts that have taken place in the balance between the main schools of Russian foreign policy thought over the past few years. Particularly important are the concepts of “a divided people,” “protecting compatriots abroad,” “the Russian world,” and the belief in “the great Russian civilization.”

THE SEARCH FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY AND FOREIGN POLICY: THREE APPROACHES

For 150 years debates in Russia about Russian identity and its role in the world have revolved around the country’s correlation with Western identity and Russia’s interaction with the West. The roots of this discourse lie in mid-19th century debates between the Slavophiles and Westernizers. Consequently, the diversity of Russian views on international relations today can be reduced to three main schools: liberals, realist-statists, and nationalists.

Russian liberalism traces its roots to the traditions of 19th-century Westernizers and draws on contemporary theories of liberal internationalism. The aim of the liberal project for Russia is to integrate the country into the “Big West.” The U.S. and Europe are the most important strategic partners for Russian liberals. Most liberals inherently lean towards the West, partly because they deem a close partnership with Washington and the European capitals as a necessary condition for restraining the undemocratic tendencies exhibited by the Russian authorities in domestic policies.

The most influential school of foreign policy thought in Russia is that of the realist-statists. The “founder” of this school is Yevgeny Primakov. Its adherents include former liberal internationalists who became disappointed with Western policies towards Russia in the 1990s. NATO’s eastern expansion was one of the key factors to push many liberal internationalists to the realist-statists.

Russian statists can be described as defensive realists who support the idea of strengthening Russia’s sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. Another important aim is to reduce U.S. global dominance. The image of Russia that statists seek to project onto the international arena is that of an influential center of a multipolar world. From the mid-2000s ideological and domestic-policy approaches became dominant with Russian statists: they have sought to secure Russia’s full sovereignty by blocking any foreign attempts to interfere in Russia’s internal affairs. Most realist-statists see the U.S. as a nation that circumvents international law in order to maintain a unipolar world order and to retain its supremacy in all spheres. The U.S. is also seen as an instigator of regime change and “colored revolutions.”

The nationalist school of foreign policy thought is comprised of at least two groups; namely, neo-imperialists and ethnic nationalists. In the first half of the 1990s the neo-imperialist project focused on the idea of reestablishing the Russian state within the boundaries of the former Soviet Union. Over time this project shrank to more limited goals in line with rigid realism and suggested the creation of a buffer zone of post-Soviet protectorates along Russia’s new borders.

The essence of the ethnic nationalist program in Russia is the idea of aligning the borders of Russia as a state and Russia as a nation; that is, creating a new polity on territories populated by ethnic Russians and some other Eastern Slavic peoples. This vision focuses on the “reunification” of Russia, Belarus, parts of Ukraine, and northern Kazakhstan. Russian ethnic nationalism draws much of its intellectual inspiration from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who was the first philosopher to challenge the supranational tradition of thought in its imperialistic form. Although ethnic nationalism is not a politically organized force in Russia, its influence has risen noticeably in the last few years.

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, liberal Westernizers made most foreign policy decisions. However, their authority was short-lived; by the mid-1990s they had left the political stage to make way for realist-statists. Following a brief “reset” period in U.S.-Russia relations during Putin’s first term (2001-2002), Moscow resumed efforts to contain U.S. unipolar hegemony. From 2009-2011 the influence of the liberal school on Russian foreign policy became somewhat more noticeable again, yet the situation changed with Putin’s return as president. His concern about Russia’s inner stability brought domestic policy considerations to the foreground, which eventually began to influence Russian foreign policy in an ever more pronounced fashion.

How did this play out? First and foremost, it affected Russia’s relations with the U.S. and Europe as the Kremlin strongly believed that the West sponsored and supported the Russian opposition and human rights activists, and thus pushed for political reform in Russia by directly meddling in Russia’s internal affairs. Initially, this belief looked like a manifestation of the growing influence of realist-statists on Russian politics due to yet another marginalization of liberals. Yet the Kremlin’s actions in the spring of 2014 have revealed a strong influence from the side of nationalist discourse as well. There is reason to believe that Russia has developed a new foreign policy doctrine that includes elements of realist-statist discourse and nationalist ideas.

Almost all public intellectuals who can be considered neo-imperialists, from Gennady Zyuganov to Alexander Prokhanov, Eduard Limonov and Sergei Udaltsov, have voiced strong support for the Kremlin’s actions with regard to events in Crimea in the spring of 2014. Ethnic nationalists are divided on the issue, and many of them are wary of Moscow’s return to the imperialist project, which might go against the interests of ethnic Russians. Wary ethnic nationalists include politicians and intellectuals advocating moderate ethnic-nationalist ideas (Alexei Navalny, Vladimir Milov), and those with radical views (Dmitry Dyomushkin). At the same time, some intellectuals from these groups (such as Valery Solovei) find that the Kremlin’s new policy disguised in the imperialist agenda actually aims to build a nation-state where political and ethnic borders would coincide.

Most liberal Westernizers criticized the Kremlin’s actions in Crimea and were dubbed the “fifth column.” After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, liberals have called consistently for building a new civil nation within the new state borders, prioritizing Russia’s relations with Western states, developing good-neighborly relations with post-Soviet states, giving priority to economic development, and rejecting the use of force in foreign policy pursuits. Moscow’s actions in the spring of 2014 clearly ran counter to liberal Westernizer’s perception of a reasonable policy. In ideological terms, they found themselves confronted by a coalition of realist-statists and nationalists. This factor definitely strengthened the Kremlin’s positions.

That situation is in sharp contrast to the period of 1997-1999, when a hot political debate unfolded over the ratification of the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. This agreement was to codify partnership relations between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the basis of mutual respect for sovereign equality, territorial integrity, the inviolability of borders, and the non-use of force. At that time two large coalitions emerged with regard to the issue: the first one included realist-statists, liberals, and most neo-imperialists who supported ratifying the treaty; the second one, comprised of ethnic nationalists and part of the neo-imperialist group (including Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s LDPR party, Yuri Luzhkov, Sergei Baburin, Alexander Lebed), was against ratification. The main argument of the latter group was that the treaty would fix the position of Crimea as belonging to Ukraine. After two years of unprecedented heated public political debate on the issue, the treaty was ratified with the logic that cordial relations with Ukraine were more important than the Crimea issue. Yevgeny Primakov played a leading role in pushing for ratification.

What has changed since then? By 2014 realist-statists and neo-imperialists have strengthened their positions and developed a belief that Russia could painlessly take over Crimea in the midst of the crisis and chaos in Ukraine. No strong opposition exists in Russia to counter such a plan. Relations with the West are no longer a priority, and its opinion can be ignored. Importantly, the ideas of a post-Soviet revanche and of Russia as a unifier of the Russian world divided by artificial state borders have become an official ideology.

RUSSIA AND THE NEW RUSSIAN WORLD

After the fall of the Soviet Union, millions of former Soviet citizens found themselves divided by new political borders. In fact, many people who had considered themselves “Russians” were now citizens (or stateless persons) of new post-Soviet states neighboring Russia.

Two main approaches have emerged in post-Soviet Russian politics in handling the “Russian issue,” i.e. the problems of people who identify themselves with Russia but live beyond its new borders. The first approach has manifested itself in the government’s halfhearted policy towards “compatriots abroad” and in the moderate concept of the “Russian world,” which stands for upholding and fostering ties between the Russian state and Russian speakers living abroad, especially those in the post-Soviet space. This concept is backed by government grants and a foundation that promotes the idea. The second approach can be seen in nationalist rhetoric about “a divided Russian people.” This rhetoric has had no outlet in specific policy decisions, yet such claims have emerged in the political elites’ speeches in 2014. If we look closely at how Russian identity has been formed over the past two hundred years, we can say – with a high degree of generalization – that the two aforementioned approaches to the “Russian issue” reflect a duality that has been typical of Russian history; namely, the duality of a nation-state and ethnic-national approach to the national identity formation.

The concepts of “compatriots abroad” and “the Russian world” have evolved within two different yet overlapping discourses. In 1992, Boris Yeltsin and Andrei Kozyrev introduced the term “compatriots abroad” into the political lexicon. The term refers to individuals who live outside the borders of the Russian Federation and who feel that they have historical, cultural, and language links with Russia. These people want to preserve these links no matter what their citizenship may be.

Since 1994, the concept has developed into a concrete state policy, manifesting itself in a series of laws and state programs, as well as in some foreign policy decisions. Until 2014, Russian policy towards compatriots abroad was actually a wary answer to the challenges of post-Soviet realities, including changes – largely artificial – to Russia’s state borders. In the 1990s, Russia did not support irredentist attitudes in Crimea, Northern Kazakhstan, and in other areas with compact Russian communities. In 2003-2010, in order to retain good relations with Turkmenistan and to secure its interest in the natural resource sphere, Russia ignored Ashgabad’s blatant violations of the rights of people with dual Turkmen-Russian citizenship. Russia’s first attempt to protect its citizens and compatriots abroad with the use of force took place in 2008 in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Yet the fact that ethnic Russians comprised only about two percent of the population of these territories made the use of compatriot rhetoric look like an unsubstantiated excuse for military action. Although officials never claimed that the term “compatriots” implied first and foremost ethnic Russians, this was exactly how the public interpreted it.

Although well known, the concept of the “Russian world” only began to be widely used in political discourse in 2007. Usually this term refers to a network of people and communities living outside of Russia’s borders, but who are incorporated into the Russian cultural and language medium. This concept has philosophical connotations and is much broader that the term “compatriots.” The notion of “compatriots” rests on legal norms and definitions, while “the Russian world” is more of an idea relating to people’s self-identification. Until the spring of 2014 these terms overlapped only in cases when individuals chose to identify themselves with both. In 2014, the terms converged in Russian political rhetoric to form a nationalist discourse about the necessity for Russia’s revival as a great power and its revanche in the post-Soviet space.

The most radical nationalists who opposed the government’s moderate policy towards upholding ties with compatriots abroad based their criticism on the ideas of “a divided Russian people” and their right to reunification. This idea was particularly voiced by Natalya Narochnitskaya, Ksenia Myalo, Victor Aksyuchits, and Alexander Sevastyanov, as well as by some politicians, such as Vladimir Zhirinovsky, Gennady Zyuganov, Yuri Luzhkov, and Sergei Baburin. In 1998-2001 several attempts were made to solidify nationalist-leaning ideas in legislation. State Duma committees discussed a series of bills: “On national-cultural development of the Russian people,” “On the right of the Russian people to self-determination, sovereignty on the entire territory of Russia, and reunification within one state,” and “On the Russian people,” which, however, were not endorsed. The Russian government had other nation-building priorities, and each time the pragmatism of the realist-statists prevailed over the ideological agendas of nationalist-leaning politicians.

After Putin effectively established presidential control over the legislative branch of government in 2003-2004, the discourse about the “divided Russian people” and their right to reunification became marginalized. During the events in spring 2014, Russian officials at first held back from using this idea for legitimizing the Kremlin’s actions, yet the taboo was lifted by Putin during his address to State Duma deputies, Federation Council members, heads of Russian regions, and civil society representatives on March 18, 2014, in which he claimed that as the Soviet Union collapsed, “the Russian people became one of the biggest, if not the biggest people in the world to be divided by borders.”

Despite the importance for domestic discourse about national identity, the concepts of “compatriots abroad,” “the Russian world,” and “a divided people” were, in the view of the realist-statists, too narrow for Russia’s positioning on the world stage as a great power. In 2008, for the first time since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russian officials began to talk about a large supranational project, as categories of civilizational identity increasingly surfaced in foreign policy statements. This resulted not from the idea of “a divided Russian people” and their relationship with neighboring peoples, but rather from deteriorating relations with the West. Russia’s failure to become part of the “Big West” and the awareness that this failure may be a longer-term outcome made Moscow reconsider Russia’s place on the international stage. The claim for great power status forced Russian politicians to formulate foreign policy goals in terms that went beyond nation-state interests.

The concept of “civilization” proved ideologically handy for the Russian authorities. The idea of civilization does not easily agree with liberal conceptions of globalization and universal democratic values. In the 19th century, the subject of the unique Russian civilization was typically raised by conservative philosophers, especially Nikolai Danilevsky and Konstantin Leontiev. More recently, the late Samuel Huntington used such categories. Likewise, Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin has claimed consistently that Russia is a civilization rather than a nation.

The Russian authorities formulated two possible approaches to the question of Russia’s civilizational identity. One approach was voiced by Dmitry Medvedev during his speech in Berlin in June 2008: “The end of the Cold War made it possible to establish genuinely equal cooperation between Russia, the European Union, and North America as three branches of European civilization.” This approach implied a reconciliation of the conservative understanding of civilization with liberal principles, which at that time had begun to reemerge in official Russian discourse. Yet even then Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, echoing Medvedev’s statement about “three branches of European civilization,” noted that accepting Western values is only one possible way to go. In his words, Russia would follow a different path, prompted by a situation where “competition is becoming truly global and acquiring a civilizational dimension; that is, competition now involves values and development models.” Lavrov first used the term “greater Russian civilization” in a Latvian Russian-language newspaper in the summer of 2009.

It appears that the Russian authorities did not see a big contradiction between the two approaches to the question of Russia’s civilizational identity. They were not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. One approach addressed the West, while the other was directed at neighboring states and Russian compatriots. Yet over time, there became less and less room on the Russian intellectual stage for interpreting Russian civilization as a “branch” of Western civilization. The concept of Russia as a separate great civilization was more in line with new conservative ideology and offered a tool for rebuffing criticism about the lack of democracy in the contemporary Russian state. Even so, until 2014 the “Russian issue” had only a moderate official interpretation: Russian civilization was described as the Russian state together with “the Russian world,” which includes all those who identify themselves with Russian culture.

In spring 2014 “the Russian world” concept was used most extensively in official rhetoric. It conveniently fell in line with the notions of “Russian native land” (in reference to Crimea), the “Russian city” (in reference to Sevastopol), and “Russian military glory” (in reference to the Black Sea Fleet.)

THE SECURITIZATION OF IDENTITY

Until spring 2014, discussions about the new Russian national identity, including the “Russian world” concept, did not have much to do with Russia’s foreign policy and national security agenda. The revolution in Ukraine allowed (and from the Kremlin’s perspective even 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.

Throughout Russia’s post-Soviet history the majority of the political and intellectual opposition elites, from Alexander Solzhenitsyn to Gennady Zyuganov, considered the mismatch between Russia’s new state borders and national (ethnic) borders to be both a great historical injustice and a key threat to Russia’s security. The official government position on the issue was that Russian nation-state should be built and civil society should be formed within the new post-Soviet borders of the Russian Federation.

The events of spring 2014 fundamentally changed the process of forming Russian national identity. The resulting situation illustrates the validity of Ilya Prizel’s observation: “While the redefinition of national identities is generally a gradual process, under situations of persistent stress even well-established identities can change at a remarkable rate, and a people’s collective memory can be ‘rearranged’ quite quickly.” In most cases such changes occur as a result of regime change, opposition victory, or radical international changes. In Russia this occurred in a different fashion.

On March 7, 2014, in commenting on the situation in Crimea, Dmitry Peskov, Putin’s press secretary, said that the President of the Russian Federation is a guarantor of security for the Russian world. This statement reflects a fundamental change in official perception of the Kremlin’s zone of responsibility in questions of security: it marks a shift in this zone from the nation-state level to the level of a community larger than a nation-state. This signals a swift securitization of the Russian world concept.

Why did Vladimir Putin take such a radical step fourteen years after he became president of the Russian Federation? Why was the domestic discourse transferred onto the international arena and securitized? The answer lies in the nature of Russia’s relations with the West. The abstract “West” began to be perceived in Russia as a power that wants to spread its values into the Russian world, thus threatening to change Russia’s unique and increasingly conservative national identity.

In the Kremlin’s interpretation, the West now not only has NATO as a tool of expansion (including potential expansion into Ukraine), but also the EU’s foreign policy. If previously the expansion of the EU’s influence was not interpreted as a threat to Russia, in 2009, with the introduction of the Eastern Partnership program, Moscow saw it as a way to isolate Russia from its neighbors. The EU’s unwillingness to take Russia’s interests into consideration in negotiations over the Association Agreement with Ukraine received a tough response from Moscow.

The final rift in the Kremlin’s relations with the West took place when Victor Yanukovich was ousted as Ukrainian president on February 22, 2014. The revolution in Kiev was perceived in Moscow as a coup d’état organized by the West on Russian world territory. 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 from which it could not retreat. If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard.”

An important aspect of this rhetoric was a particular emphasis on the historical dimension of the Russia-West relationship. In his March 18, 2014 presidential address, Putin clearly stated: “We have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of Russia’s containment, pursued in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, continues today.”

After the end of the Cold War and as a consequence of the West’s shortsighted policies, Russia found itself excluded from European and transatlantic security architecture. As a result, Russia began to look for a place in the international system by relying on “big ideas” emanating from domestic discourse, and by reinterpreting Russian history as a process largely isolated from global processes.

By spring 2014 Moscow had developed a seemingly irrational combination of the logic and rhetoric borrowed from the discourses concerning three spheres: (1) national identity (involving the ideas of “compatriots abroad,” “the Russian world,” “a divided people,” and “a greater Russian civilization”); (2) international security; and (3) domestic stability. In all these spheres, the Kremlin sees threats emanating from the West.

The transformation of Russian national identity over the last two and a half years has affected the post-Cold War international system. In Russia, a new foreign policy doctrine has been formulated based on a series of ideas about a unique Russian civilization, “the Russian world,” and the need to protect compatriots abroad, including with the use of force. This doctrine 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 creates great tension in relations between Russia, Western countries, and practically all post-Soviet states. In what looks like a rectification of a historical injustice and protection of “the Russian world” from one perspective, others see a large state taking over the territory of a weaker neighbor.

The question posed by Robert Jervis about why people’s perceptions of the world differ is particularly relevant for analyzing current relations between Russia, the West, and post-Soviet states. In this case the answer lies in the fact that Russia’s perceptions have formed in complete isolation from the rest of the world.

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