

## Vladimir Putin's Civilizational Turn

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### Abstract

Vladimir Putin's arrival to power was accompanied by the new rhetoric of Russia as a distinct system of cultural values or civilization. Although the new civilizational discourse has not replaced that of globalization and national interests, it is increasingly deployed to shape and frame Russia's domestic and international priorities. Historically subject to Western and Islamic influences, Russia now seeks to position itself as a power capable of synthesizing these influences and assisting the world in managing global cultural diversity.

### The Rise of Civilizational Discourse

In the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s, the mainstream language was that of adjustment to the international community and protecting national interests. The vision of Russia as a civilization in the world of competitive cultural visions was advocated only by conservative critics of the Kremlin from communists to neo-Eurasianists and imperial nationalists.

In 2008, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov became the first official to argue that "competition is becoming truly global and acquiring a civilizational dimension; that is, the subject of competition now includes values and development models." Since his election campaign, Vladimir Putin too has adopted the discourse of Russia's distinctiveness and national values even though throughout the 2000s, he was commonly dismissive of calls for a "Russian idea" by instead filling his speeches with indicators of Russia's economic and political successes. In his 2007 address to the Federation Council, Putin even ridiculed searches for a national idea as a Russian "old-style entertainment" (*starinnaya russkaya zabava*) by comparing them to searches for a meaning of life. By contrast, in his 2012 address to Russia's parliament, Putin's spoke of new demographic and moral threats that must be overcome if the nation is to "preserve and reproduce itself." He further stated that "In the 21st century amid a new balance of economic, civilizational and military forces Russia must be a sovereign and influential country... We must be and remain Russia."

The new civilizational language of the Kremlin prompted some observers to speculate that Russia is turning in an anti-Western and hardline nationalist direction. In support of the view, they point to Russia's opposition to the West's international policies, including those on the missile defense system and the Middle East's stabilization, as well the Kremlin's visibly hardened stance on non-governmental organizations and political protesters at home, as signs of Russia's hardline nationalism. Such interpretation of Russia's civilizational turn is premature because the Kremlin is yet to deviate from the standard line of preserving strong relations with Europe and the United States in a global

world. Importantly, the recent Foreign Policy Concept signed by Putin into law in February 2013 describes the world in terms of "rivalry of values and development models within the framework of the universal principles of democracy and the market economy."

To further understand the meaning of the new civilizational language, let us examine the context in which it has risen to prominence.

### The Three Contexts of Russia's Civilizational Turn

Russia's new turn to the language of a locally distinct civilization should be explained by several inter-related global, regional, and domestic developments. Globally, Russia confronts the ongoing efforts by the United States to spread democratization across the world and present Western values as superior to those of the rest of the world. The Kremlin increasingly views the language of democracy and human rights as a form of cultural pressure from those who seek to justify the legitimacy of hegemonic and military actions toward others from the former-Yugoslavia to Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Russia supported the United States in its war with terrorism after 9/11 but advocated a measured response within the United Nations' jurisdiction. The Kremlin supported the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan but not in Iraq. Instead of engaging moderate Muslims, U.S. policies tended to isolate them, which played into the hands of Islamic radicals.

Regionally, Russia is threatened by the fear of radical and militant Islam. Russian analysts and politicians often speak of special relations with Muslims but differentiate between moderate and radical Islamists. Putin on numerous occasions expressed his respect for traditional Islam as integral to Russia's religious, cultural and social fabric by separating such Islam from "all forms of religious intolerance and extremism." In the post-9/11 context, the latter are frequently strengthened by the West's tendency to use force for solving regional crises, rather than engaging moderate Muslims. From Russia's point of view, what began as a counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan with relatively broad international

support turned into a “war of civilizations,” or a U.S. crusade against Muslims. As a result, the Westernist and radical Islamist trends collided and spread violence and instability across the world. This explains Russia’s fear of regime change in the Middle East from Egypt to Syria, which the Kremlin sees as the recipe for radicalizing global Islam.

The global and regional trends are reinforced at home. The growing influence of Islamist ideologies, rising immigration from Muslim-dominated former Soviet republics and desolation in the North Caucasus have created a dangerous environment. Previously contained in Chechnya, Islamist terrorism has spread to Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and North Ossetia. For Russia—a country with 20 million to 25 million Muslims—supporting the West in its “war of civilizations” would mean inviting fire into its own home. Russia has traditionally addressed the issue of ethnic/religious diversity by introducing a trans-national idea, or an idea with a cross-cultural appeal. Initially, this was the Eastern Christian idea that provided various Slavic tribes with social unity and justice. At a later stage of the Russian empire’s existence, Russians had to learn to coexist with Islam and supported those Muslim authorities who were willing to submit to the empire’s general directions. Under the Soviet system, the state sought to further integrate Muslim communities by introducing the secular communist ideology as a new trans-national idea. However, the collapse of the Soviet state ended the appeal of the communist trans-national idea and created a vacuum of values. Following the 1991 dissolution, Russians have lacked an idea of unity and justice, as well as the state capacity to enforce unified rules across the nation.

Throughout the 2000s, the state unity was further threatened—in part due to Russia’s economic success relative to some of its neighbors—by the uncontrolled flow of migrants of non-Slavic nationalities. Multiple inter-ethnic riots have taken place, and Russians have developed a strong resentment toward immigrants from Central Asia, Caucasus, and China. A particularly strong expression of tensions between ethnic Russians and non-Russians from the Caucasus was the riot of 5,000 Russian nationalists and football fans on Manezh Square, Moscow on December 11, 2010 against the release of five men from Northern Caucasus, from police custody, suspected of murdering Russian football fan Yegor Sviridov. As the government was failing to integrate labor immigrants, nationalist politicians advocated imposing tight restrictions on immigration. While some of them argued for re-unification of ethnic Russians, another, a more isolationist group that included the blogger Alexei Navalny emerged to challenge both the Kremlin and the

imperial nationalists. The group members were often supportive of tighter restrictions on immigration, but they were especially critical of the Kremlin’s subsidies for the republics of Northern Caucasus, which they linked to crime, corruption, and disorder in the country. At the end of 2011, the nationalist-isolationist organizations joined the wave of public protests against falsified elections to the Duma and became regular critics of the government’s policies as non-democratic and disrespectful of demands by ethnic Russians.

In this context Putin articulated the idea of state-civilization by recognizing ethnic Russians as “the core (*sterzhen*)” that binds the fabric of Russia as a culture and a state. Although some analysts saw the idea as paving the way for Russian nationalism, Putin also argued against “attempts to preach the ideas of building a Russian ‘national’, mono-ethnic state” as “contrary to our entire thousand-year history” and expressed concern with state ineffectiveness, “corruption”, and “flaws of the law enforcement system” as the root causes of ethnic violence. Along these lines, the new official nationalities strategy until 2025 signed by Putin in December 2012 re-introduced Russia as a “unique socio-cultural civilizational entity formed of the multi-people Russian nation” and, under pressures of Muslim constituencies, removed the reference to ethnic Russians as the core of the state.

### **A Future Direction: a Fortress or a Bridge?**

The new civilizational discourse has the potential to serve as a blueprint for foreign policy. Its support groups abroad may include those who gravitate to Russia due to a common historical experience, rather than merely ethnic bonds. The new motivation behind Russia’s actions abroad is to rebuild relationships in post-Soviet Eurasia by using what Putin once referred to as “the historical credits of trust and friendship.” In the summer of 2012, he instructed Russia’s ambassadors to be more active in influencing international relations by relying on tools of lobbyism and soft power. In response to those critical of the government for lacking a “civilizational mission” or an “image of a future”, the Kremlin proposed to build the Eurasian Union as a new cross-ethnic community with an eye on the European Union, on the one hand, and China, on the other. In addition to considerations of economic development and balance of power, Russia’s emphasis on building the Eurasian Union, resistance to Western interventions in the Middle East, or turn to Asia-Pacific region are likely to be shaped by the new vision of Russia as a state-civilization.

Is Russia hardening as an anti-Western and nationalist power or does it merely seek to contribute to the management of global cultural diversity? So far, most

evidence points in the direction of the latter, rather than the former. In the absence of additional powerful pressures from abroad, Russia is likely to stay the course by trying to manage external and internal cultural diversity and positioning itself as a voice in favor of tolerance and dialogue.

At the same time, Russia's civilizational turn is far from complete and will be further shaped by the above-identified factors. The cumulative influence of Western pressures and a growing instability in the Middle East may push the Kremlin in the more isolationist and nationalist direction. The civilizational identity of a global cultural bridge may then yield to that of a fortress. Actions by outside powers, especially the Western ones, are of a legitimizing nature. A nation must act in a particular context and with an eye to whether its policies generate support or criticism abroad. If outside developments provide the sought external support, the Kremlin is less likely to engage in anti-Western rhetoric/actions and its civilizational claims are less likely to obtain the nationalist overtones, all others being equal. Alternatively, if Russia's claims to its interests and values are denied, the Kremlin is more likely to act and speak in a confrontational manner thereby inviting Russia–West relations to reach a degree of cultural hostility. For instance, should destabilization in the Middle East spread to Iran and Afghanistan, it will threaten to seriously undermine

Central Asia and Russia's Northern Caucasus, thereby strengthening the traditionally nationalist defense and security establishment inside the country. Actions by the West is another factor. The policy of leveraging human rights in Russia, as demonstrated by the Magnitsky Act crisis, is not going to bring any short-term dividends to the Western side and has a strong potential to derail the relationship further. If European countries adopt their own versions of the Magnitsky Act or if President Barak Obama agrees to expand the Magnitsky list to include senior Russian officials, the crisis in relations with Russia has the potential to escalate into a greater confrontation.

Russia's domestic confidence is another important factor to consider. Russia remains domestically vulnerable to potential spikes of ethno-nationalism and economic instability. In the context of its external vulnerability, factors such as a strong economic performance or other successes at home and abroad may serve to encourage the regime to be receptive to advice from hardline civilizationists. Even when the regime's domestic legitimacy is in decline, it may still resort to the discourse of civilization to compensate for political weakness. Western criticisms will then be viewed as validating Russia's claims to its distinctiveness and cultural self-standing (*samobytnost'*) thereby empowering more nationalist voices within the civilizational milieu.

#### *About the Author*

Andrei P. Tsygankov is a Professor at San Francisco State University. His latest books are *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin* (Cambridge, 2012), and *Russian International Theory* (Moscow, 2013).