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The Surprising Allure of Russian Soft Power

by Nicolai N. Petro

The six Russian national security documents issued since Putin first became president in 2000 display a remarkable conceptual consistency.¹

They argue that a polycentric world is emerging and shifting the balance of power from the West to the Asia-Pacific region.² The West is attempting to prevent this, according to Russia, and this will mean greater competition over values and less cooperation in combating global threats like migration, pandemics, global warming and resource scarcity. Unless the West alters course from confrontation to cooperation, the result will be chaos in the international system, which would be very bad for Russia.³

To provide greater global stability, Russia intends to pursue "an open, rational, and pragmatic foreign policy, eliminating the need for expensive confrontation in, among other things, a new arms race." Russia's objective is to "gain as many equal partners as it can, in as many regions of the globe."⁴

Finally, Russia sees "returning to one's roots," as a global trend, especially in the Middle East and North Africa. If other civilizations respond to this by trying to impose their own values, a clash of civilizations is all but inevitable. Partnership among civilizations, rather than conflict, is much to be desired, but it would require a common framework of values. Fortunately, says Russia, such a framework can be found in the world's major religions.

A careful reading of these documents, the most authoritative statements of Russia's worldview publicly available, challenges several common Western assumptions.

The first is that Russia rejects the post-Cold War international order. This is not correct. Russia fears global chaos, and believes that efforts to preserve the global hegemony of the West will exacerbate tensions and lead to a breakdown of the international order. Russia places a high value on the international order because, to the extent that it is rooted in the supremacy of international law and under the guidance of UN Security Council, it mitigates chaos.⁵

How does Russia reconcile this with the annexation of Crimea, support for the rebellion in Donbass, and accusations that it engages in cyber warfare against the US and Europe? By providing legal arguments for its actions.

On Crimea, Russia's legal position is that, although the Ukrainian constitution prohibits local referenda on secession, this is now trumped by the UN Charter (article 1), which stipulates that people have the right to self-determination. Russia adopted this view following the July 22, 2010 decision of the International Court of Justice to recognize Kosovo's independence from Serbia. At the time, the U.S. State Department filed a brief in support of Kosovo arguing that "there was no general rule [because] these were political acts." They were therefore worthy of recognition because declaring independence had created a new "political reality" in the region.⁶

Russia originally opposed this ICJ ruling, but later found it quite congenial in Ukraine. Russia argues that Ukrainians living in Crimea and Donbass have the same right to determine their allegiance that Kosovars did when they were living in Serbia, and that the Crimean referendum of March 16, 2014 overwhelmingly ratified that decision.

Most international legal experts, however, argue that Russia facilitated the ability of Crimean authorities to hold such a referendum with masked military intervention. Therefore the results, and the annexation, should not be considered legal.⁷ To this Russia (and local Crimean officials) make two counterarguments. First, on the charge that the presence of Russian troops invalidates the referendum, the Crimean government argues that responsibility for law and order at the polling stations was borne by local self-defense forces and volunteers, not Russian troops.

Second, to the point that the Ukrainian Constitution states that the separation of a part of the country's territory cannot be subject to a local referendum, Crimean officials point out that the authorities in Kiev revoked the acting Ukrainian Constitution on February 21st and reinstated the 1996 constitution. This was done in one day, without any judicial review, and as such was illegal. The Crimean government responded by assuming control until 'constitutional order' was restored in Kiev, and began negotiations with Kiev.⁸ When those failed, Crimean authorities acted in accordance with their view that Crimean sovereignty had been restored to the *status quo ante* by the revocation of the constitution, and this was the issue put to the people in the March referendum.⁹

With respect to Donbass, Russia has consistently insisted that no active Russian troops are fighting there, although it does acknowledge that Russian volunteers might be participating in the fighting. It similarly rejects Western accusations of cyber warfare. Moreover, in the latter instance, Russia has long been a proponent of the need for international treaties to safeguard countries from such interference.¹⁰

The bottom line here is that Russia is not rejecting the international framework of conflict resolution. Rather, by making counterarguments within that framework, it is reaffirming its importance. This is the antithesis of the Soviet approach, which rejected the validity of the entire "bourgeois" legal and international system, although in practice it abided by many of its conventions.

A second common myth is that Russia seeks to undermine the "liberal U.S. led order." In fact, Russia expects the US to remain the leader of the liberal, western model of global development. It argues, however, that the West must learn to co-exist with other, competing models. Russian analysts often make the analogy to institutional religions. They can coexist peacefully, so long as they do not seek to impose their view of the Truth on others and respect each other's value to humanity's cultural diversity.

Russia thus sees itself as that part of the West that perceives liberal fundamentalism as futile and seeks to establish a framework of global leadership around the values that the West shares with non-Western states. Prominent political theorist Boris Mezhuev has dubbed this approach "civilizational realism."¹¹

Civilizational realism differs from classical realism in that it recognizes the importance of values in international affairs. It differs from classical liberalism in that it sees value in the diversity of cultural communities, as well as individuals. Russia's approach can therefore best be described not as opposition to liberalism, but as a different form of liberalism, one that is divorced from Western hegemony and open to non-western traditions and influences.¹²

In this context, it becomes easier to understand the emphasis that Russia has placed on the spiritual and cultural aspects of international politics—"soft power"—since 2013. If soft power is thought of as the use of religious and/or cultural affinity to achieve foreign policy objectives, then many of Russia's neighbors remain quite receptive to Russian soft power. Sometimes, as in Ukraine, Georgia, Bulgaria, and Moldova this is manifested in a "love-hate" relationship that keeps Russia at the center of public attention, even as national elites seek to distance their country from Russian political and cultural influence.¹³

For example, a November 2016 nationwide survey in Ukraine showed that 26% agree that Ukrainians and Russians are, as Putin likes to say, "one people," while 51.1% say they are "brother nations."¹⁴ A December 2017 survey revealed that a plurality of Ukrainians, 36%, regarded the collapse of the Soviet Union as negative thing.¹⁵ And although the number of Ukrainians favoring some type of an economic and political alliance with Russia and Belarus has fallen sharply since 2014, it stills hover around 20% nationwide, thanks to broad support in the Eastern and Southern parts of Ukraine.¹⁶

It is important to note, however, that surveys taken in Ukraine since 2014 most likely understate the level of support for "pro-Russian" views, since they do not include Crimea and the rebel regions of Donbass. Were these areas included, Kiev based political analyst Kost' Bondarenko suggests, it could shift the national results by as much as 10-15%, essentially putting national popular sentiment right back where it was before the 2014 Maidan.¹⁷

Finally, there is the myth of the singular unpopularity of Russian soft power. Recent discussions of European politics often highlight how much Russia's newly minted traditionalist image resonates among conservative and religious groups around the globe.¹⁸ As the American led international order has become increasingly chaotic, more Europeans have begun to equate Russia's authoritarianism with stability and political competence.¹⁹ Some even see Trump as a greater danger for Europe than Putin.²⁰ As the editor of *La Stampa*, one of Italy's major papers, put it recently, "Nobody ever took this poll but I believe that if you were asking all Italians today who is the most popular foreign leader in all of Italy, Putin would win."²¹

Many western analysts cannot fathom why this would ever lead to a confluence of interests among countries as diverse as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. A better way to think of it is this--the soft power of the BRICS is not an expression of just one set of national values, but of the common values that this group of nations feels should underlie the international order. Russia's worldview fits this agenda like a glove, thereby magnifying the impact of Russian soft power.

As a result, Russia now believes, with some reason, that it can rely on a core constituency of states to assist it in the face of intense western hostility. The international response to the latest poisoning incident involving Russia illustrates this divide yet again. While more than two dozen Western governments have expressed their solidarity with the UK and expelled more than a hundred diplomats, India's former top diplomat said that such Western actions showed a "lack of sobriety [that] only raises suspicions about Britain's version and intentions," while a leading Chinese daily described them as "nothing more than a form of Western bullying."²²

Reaching a *modus vivendi* between the West and Russia will therefore require more than just setting aside the "values gap," as the Obama administration tried to do with its "reset." It will require a true "values breakthrough"—namely, envisioning Russia as a quintessential part of the West.

Instead of avoiding a dialogue with Russia about values, we should embrace it, and frame it in the relevant cultural context. That cultural context is the Roman Empire. Not just the Western part, which collapsed in the fourth century, but also the Eastern part, that lasted another thousand years. By reaffirming our *common* cultural heritage, the full legacy of Greece and Rome can become part of our common cultural discourse and inform our discussions of democracy.²³

Only by ending Russia's estrangement from Europe, as the late German president Roman Herzog put it, can the soul of Europe truly be healed.²⁴ At the end of this path of reconciliation, Czech president Milos Zeman muses, tongue-in-cheek, "Russia will become a member of the European Union. If you don't like that, then think of it this way: The European Union must join the Russian Federation."²⁵★

Footnotes

1. June 28, 2000 "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation; (2) July 12, 2008 "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation;" (3) May 12, 2009 "National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation;" (4) February 12, 2013 "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation;" (5) December 31, 2015 "National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation;" (6) November 30, 2016 "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation."

2. November 30, 2016, "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation" (Section 2, point 5).

3. *Ibid*; February 12, 2013, "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation" (Section 2, point 14).

4. May 12, 2009 "National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (Section 2, point 13);" December 31, 2015, National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation Section 2, point 28).

5. As Dmitry Trenin notes, Russia has offered no alternative design to what exists today and no comprehensive reform blueprint. It is not the world order as such that Moscow challenges, but the U.S. domination of that order. Hence, "the UN Security Council has always been the right model for the Russians, while the NATO-Russia Council has not for this very reason." "Looking out Five Years: What Should Washington and Its European Allies Expect From Moscow?" *Carnegie Moscow Center*, August 24, 2017. <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/72813>.

6. Harold H. Koh, "The International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion on Kosovo's Declaration of Independence" *U.S. Department of State* (archived), FPC Briefing on July 22, 2010. <https://2009-2017-fpc.state.gov/145040.htm>.

7. Notable dissenters include Reinhard Merkel, professor of law and legal philosophy at the University of Hamburg, "Die Krim und das Völkerrecht. Kühle Ironie der Geschichte," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 7, 2014. http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/die-krim-und-das-voelkerrecht-kuehle-ironie-der-geschichte-12884464.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_2; Michael Geistlinger, professor of law at the University of Salzburg (Austria), "Der Beitritt der Republik Krim zur Russländischen Föderation aus der Warte des Selbstbestimmungsrechts der Völker," *Archiv des Völkerrechts*, vol. 52, Number 2, June 2014, pp. 175-204 (30); and Peter Ørebeck, professor of law at the University of Tromsø (Norway), "International law and the Crimea," *Radikal Portal*, June 8, 2017. <https://is.gd/lzeAsd>. Noted American jurist Eric Posner has argued that the equities in this case, as in other cases of separatism, are "complicated," and that "the secession of Crimea, good or bad, is now an accomplished fact." "What to do About Crimea. Nothing," *Slate*, March 27 2014. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/view_from_chicago/2014/03/sanctions_against_russia_why_everything_we_are_doing_about_crimea_is_completely.html.

8. The trial *in absentia* of former president Viktor Yanukovich is bringing to light fascinating new details about the actions of the Ukrainian government during those days. Parliamentarian Nestor Shufrych was delegated to head negotiations with the new Crimean leadership. On February 28, 2014 he met with Crimean leaders and worked out an agreement that would keep Crimea in Ukraine by restoring the Crimean constitution of 1992, without the Crimean presidency. A delegation was scheduled to arrive on Monday, March 3rd to work out the final text. By Monday morning, however, the Prosecutor General Makhnitsky had received orders to issue an arrest warrant for Crimean leaders Konstantinov and Aksyonov, to which Aksyonov responded by taking over control of government institutions in Crimea. Taras Kozub, "V vozdukhe povis vopros: kto sdal Krym?" *Vesti*, February 8, 2018. <https://vesti-ukr.com/strana/276905-v-vozdrukhe-povis-vopros-kto-sdal-krym-kak-prokhdili-perehovory-kieva-s-poluostrovom-v-fevrale-2014>.

9. "Crimea referendum: What does the ballot paper say?" *BBC News*, March 10, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26514797>.

10. Jeremy Kirk, "Russia Pushes for UN Resolution on Cyberspace," *PC World*, October 3, 2011. https://www.pcworld.com/article/240983/russia_pushes_for_un_resolution_on_cyberspace.html. John Markoff and Andrew Kramer, "U.S. and Russia Differ on a Treaty for Cyberspace," *New York Times*, JUNE 27, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/28/world/28cyber.html>.

11. Boris Mezhev, "O relaizme I beregakh tsivilizatsii," *Vzglyad*, January 13, 2017. <http://www.vz.ru/columns/2017/1/13/853243.print.html>.

12. International relations theorist Giorgio Shani refers to this as establishing a 'post-Western' understanding of security which is tolerant of different conceptions of peace, freedom and dignity in different cultural traditions. On such a basis, different conceptions of security and IR would invariably arise. "Interview—Giorgio Shani," *E-International Relations*, Jan 2 2017, <http://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/02/interview-giorgio-shani/>.

13. "Moscow Clout Rises as Bulgaria, Moldova Elect Pro-Russia Leaders," *Voice of America*, November 14, 2016. <https://www.voanews.com/a/analysis-pro-russia-trends-in-bulgaria-moldova/3595445.html>.

14. "Bolee poloviny ukrainsev schitayut rossioyan bratskim narodom," *Forbes* (Ukraine), December 16, 2016. <http://forbes.net.ua/news/1425670-bolee-poloviny-ukraincev-schitayut-rossiyan-bratskim-narodom>; "Kazhdyi vtoroi ukrainets schitayet rossiiyan bratskim narodom," *Strana*, December 16, 2016. <https://strana.ua/news/45634-dlya-poloviny-ukraincev-rossiyane-yavlyayutsya-bratskim-narodom-opros.html>; "Polovina ukrainsev schitayut rossioyan bratskim narodom," *Pravda* (Ukraine), December 16, 2016. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2016/12/16/7130036/>.

15. "Mozhlyvosti ta pereshkody nan shlyakhu demokraticnoho perekhodu v Ukraini," *National Endowment for Democracy*, conducted December 2017. Slide 19, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/December%202017%20Polling%20Results%20%28Ukrainian%29.pdf>.

16. "Kazhdyi pyaty ukrainets khochet soyuza s Rossiei in Belarusy," *Zerkalo nedeli*, August 22, 2017, <https://zn.ua/UKRAINE/kazhdyi-pyatyy-ukrainec-hochet-soyuza-s-rossiei-i-belarusy-257914.html>.

17. Anastasiya Rafal, "7 voprosov o tom, pochemu ukraintsy razocharovyvayutsya v evropeiskom vybore," *Vesti reporter*, No. 28 (2015), <http://reporter.vesti-ukr.com/art/y2015/n28/17502-7-voprosov-o-tom-pochemu-ukraincy-razocharovyvayutsya-v-evropejskom-vybore.html>.

18. Valerie Delimpe, "Carte. L'Europe qui aime Poutine," *Slate.fr*, November 29, 2016. <http://www.slate.fr/story/129209/europe-poutine>; In the United States, conservative columnist and former Nixon aide Patrick J. Buchanan has become the most prominent spokesman of the view that Putin's religious rhetoric makes him "one of us." "Putin may be seeing the future with more clarity than Americans still caught up in a Cold War paradigm. As the decisive struggle in the second half of the 20th century was vertical, East vs. West, the 21st century struggle may be horizontal, with conservatives and traditionalists in every country arrayed against the militant secularism of a multicultural and transnational elite. Patrick J. Buchanan, "Putin's Paleoconservative Moment," *The American Conservative*, December 17, 2013. <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/2013/12/17/putins-paleoconservative-moment/>.

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22. Kanwal Sibal, former foreign secretary of India, "Russia-Baiting and the International Fallout of the Murky Skripal Poisoning Case," *The Wire* (India), March 30, 2018. <https://thewire.in/world/russia-baiting-international-fallout-skripal-poisoning>; "Russian diplomat expulsions signal crude side of Western intention," *Global Times* (China), March 27, 2018. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1095361.shtml>.

23. As president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev made this very point in his first foreign address. Dmitry Medvedev, "Speech at Meeting with German Political, Parliamentary and Civic Leaders," *Kremlin.ru*, June 5, 2008. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/320>.

24. Roman Herzog, "Europe Needs Russian Soul," *RIA Novosti*, September 2, 1997.

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