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## **RUSSIA'S CIVILIZATIONAL NARRATIVE : METAPOLITICS AND PRAXIS.**

Paul Sevestre

n° 642852

Under the supervision of Mr. Igor Pellicciari, Professor of Russian Studies  
and, as co-supervisor Mr. Lorenzo Castellani, Professor of History of Political Institutions.

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*I have chosen to mention some contextual elements, notably in the first chapter, that might be a bit repetitive to a public familiar with Russian Studies or literature on Russian politics. I also tried to rely as much as possible on examples as diverse as possible, it might succeed that two elements get treated in two separate chapters. I hope that this will not be the cause of too much inconvenience.*

## Introduction :

Through the last decades, Russia has tended to state that its civilization is distinct from the Western and Eastern ones, presenting itself as a unique, autonomous and coherent one. This essay will try to provide an analysis of Russia's civilizational narratives by voluntarily adopting the "essentialist" standpoint developed by numerous intellectuals and by the Russian political *élites*. It will highlight the peculiarities, the implications and the outcomes of such discourses in Russia, in Russia's sphere of influence, and in global affairs. Essentialist analysis of countries "essence" or "souls" knew a golden age in Western political philosophy throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century following the processes of nationalization that occurred during this time-lapse. My attitude in this paper in relation to these speeches is not an ingenuous one : I acknowledge that these national narratives are socially constructed, that they reflect an idealized vision that dominant groups craft, in order to justify the behavior of a given political entity in a given space-time. If the behavior of states can be analyzed throughout the prism of Realist, Liberal or Constructivist frameworks, we can also agree on the fact that a Culturalist-Essentialist standpoint is relevant even if sparsely employed. In fact, this analytical prism is, according to the literature, a relevant one for someone trying to apprehend contemporary Russia because civilizational narratives are key elements of the *élites'* public discourses when referring to Russia, the Russian identity or to Russia's counterparts. It constitutes a heavily symbolic vector through which the Russian *élites* – and the society – see and define itself.

In a same fashion, a historical perspective allows us to understand in a finer way the United States' attitude and its relations with others, by considering several notions. "the Manifest Destiny of the United States" or France's "Republicanism" are notions that one cannot avoid to study when having an interest in modern French history. They constitute what authors call "metanarratives". Substantially, a strong narrative that encompasses the majority

of the political ideas and produces a symbolic imagery in a given time-space. The French and American metanarratives are especially important as they contributed to craft, in two distinct eras, Russia's one. They lay on the same kind of mythology than the "Russian Idea" did in the Tsarist era, or mission of the accomplishment of Communism under Soviet rule. I do not pretend that these metanarratives suffice to explain balances of power, international antagonism or civil societies' behavior as many other factors come into play. However, I think that they are worth studying to better understand Russia.

In this introduction, I will develop the most noteworthy aspects of that civilizational related to the theme of this essay in view of the fact that it will be the subject of an upcoming part. The civilizational narrative, which according to many authors, is linked to what used to be called the Russian Idea, can be explained as followed. It consists in the affirmation of Russia as an autonomous civilization, characterized by a unity in terms of cultural and moral values, with at its core the Russian culture and the Orthodox faith. The Russian Idea, somehow, surpasses these two components, forming a *sui generis* civilizational entity. It encompasses the former Soviet and Tsarist territories; it is built upon the legacy of these two and has to defend itself from "decadent" yet "imperialist" Western challengers who try to undermine its unity, sovereignty and impose its values as they are engaged in a struggle for dominance.

The notion of civilization is a simpler one. It has been synthesized as follow: "civilization can be defined as a high-order identity category based on cultural (as opposed to physical) attributes that occupies a level of abstraction between "human being" and "ethnic group" or "nation," tending to subsume multiple nations and ethnic groups but not all of them" (Hale, H. E. ; Laruelle M. 2020). This definition is appealing when considering Russia which is characterized by an immense territory encompassing several continents, religious influences and ethnics groups. In addition, it must be considered in the light of the former Tsarist Empire and Soviet Union which expended themselves far from the actual borders of the Federation of Russia. For the major part of its modern history, Russia labeled itself as European: yet some new notions flourished: 'distinct' civilization, 'state-civilization', 'Eurasian' civilization among the Russian intellectual *élite*. We see that it used to label Russia as a member of a civilization and that such a move, has become, indeed, highly political.

The two remaining concepts of this thesis' tittle meet an easy definition: On one hand, the notion of "metapolitics" is formally introduced at the turn of the nineteenth century by the

German philosopher August Ludwig von Schlözer and is used by the prominent conservative thinker and political theorist Joseph de Maistre which compares it to a “metaphysic of the political (...) a science which deserves all the attention of the observers”. The concept evolved during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, meeting various interpretations among philosophical schools which I do not intend to mention as it constitutes an epistemologic question outside my work. Nevertheless, that concept became assimilated to the one of political hegemony or political struggle. It is synthetized as follows: “the metapolitical essence of the political lays in the tendency from a part to occupy the centrality, while submitting the other part to its domination” (Esposito R. 2014). Interestingly, the concept became frequently used among far-right and far-left circles to conceptualize relations of enmity or antagonistic resistance to certain politics; notably among communist circles in the early twentieth century or in the ‘new right’ movement in Western Europe from the seventies onwards. On the other hand, the notion of « praxis » from the Ancient Greek “πρᾶξις”, refers to the active and practical dimension of human activities. It has a finality and aim with a precise goal: the modification of a social relation, an environment or whatever else.

One might argue that a more contemporary, a more “Anglo-Saxon” vocabulary might have suited better to the tittle and the flow of the dissertation. The latter expressions could certainly be traduced in an easiest manner and a one echoing discourses in the West. My choice came from the employ by the Russian intelligentsia itself of these very terms, and I wanted to try to reproduce that fashion for the reader. I would like to bring to the attention of the members of the jury, that many of the concepts, assertions, and theories which I will present are crafted with the design of being oriented towards a diversity of publics – often Russian but not exclusively. I will not systematically criticize the validity of these concepts. That does not mean that I consider them valid or adequate. I use them as part of the conceptual apparatus of Russia’s political and intellectual *élites*.

My review of the literature and the angle I have chosen to adopt, have brought me to the idea that the articulation of these three notions: civilizational narrative, metapolitics and praxis were likely to produce an interesting and original topic for that dissertation. During the two decades following the fall of the Soviet Union, the *élites* of the Federation of Russia have claimed not to be driven by any ideological motif. The Constitution of the Republic of Russia in its thirteenth article, states that “No ideology may be established as state or obligatory one”.

Despite this assertion, I will try through this dissertation to address that topic and ask myself if it is possible to affirm that Russia's civilizational distinctiveness and the conservatism have become Russia's state ideology which commands its political agenda.

I will discuss if whether or not we can argue that the *praxis* and the metapolitics of today's Russia can be considered a coherent worldview. My hypothesis being that the civilizational discourse is the cornerstone of Russian metapolitics which, to a certain extent, nurtures the states' *praxis* in domestic and international affairs. In order to tackle that question and discuss it with a variety of angles, I will proceed with the development of the following chapters:

The timeframe of this essay will mostly focus on the period of time going from 1991 up to the latest development of events in the Ukraine and Armenia. However, some historical and genealogical detours, or some ongoing or most recent having a special interest will also be mention.

In order to tackle that question and discuss it with a variety of angles I will proceed with the development of the following chapters:

- I. Shaping the Civilizational Narrative: a Historical Overview.
- II. Putin's 'Cultural Turn': Metapolitics and the Question of Ideology.
- III. Frontiers, Identities and Political Power in the 'Near Abroad'.
- IV. The Western Question: "Carl Schmitt in Moscow".

## **Chapter I : Shaping the Civilizational Narrative : a Historical Overview.**

There was no debate in the *élites* regarding the geographic and civilization anchorage of Russia until the end of the nineteenth century. Russia was then considered the oriental border of the Christian-European civilization, as it includes over time, Caucasus, Eastern Europe and parts of Central Asia. Until the nineteenth century, the *élites* and the nobility were even reluctant to speak Russian, preferring French, because they had been educated in a Western European way. Russian classical literature has splendidly painted that cultural discrepancy between the lower classes and the *élites*.

Several factors such as the Invasion of Russia during the Napoleonic Wars, the “betrayal” of European nations during Crimean War<sup>1</sup>, the flourishing on the continent of political ideals and, later on, the formation of the Soviet Union shaped an original national sentiment, stressing the idea of Russia’s distinctiveness from its European counterparts. However, as we will see, several narratives were available to the Russian *élites*, following the fall of the Soviet Union.

### *Section 1 : Post-Soviet Politics : A Diversity of Ideological Options.*

#### **Subsection 1.a : Westernism and Liberalism.**

The Western question has always been a matter of debates in Russian. It uses to be a way through the which publicist reflected on their own identity, singularity or – hypothetical – belonging to the West. It notably finds its roots in the debate between nineteenth century publicists on the reaction towards Enlightenment and the on posture to adopt *vis-à-vis* the revolutions: broadly speaking, debates and confrontation based on ideology and politics. We can quote, as revelators of that historical antagonism, the Decembrist insurrection<sup>2</sup> which aspired to set a reformist agenda in Russia, or to the fierce quarrel which opposed Ivan Turgenev (Europeanist) and Fyodor Dostoevsky (Russian Messianic), two major authors of the second half of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> 1885-1856, a conflict in which the United Kingdom, France and the Kingdom of Sardinia joined the Ottoman Empire I its war against the Russian Empire in order to limit its influence. That war ended in a defeat of the Russian forces and to important territorial losses and a limitation of the Russian influence in Eastern Europe.

<sup>2</sup> Which took place on the 26 of December 1825. It is noteworthy to say that during the protests which occurred in January 2021 in support of Alexei Navalny, those protesting were sometimes labeled on pro-Kremlin medias as “Dekabrist”.

The Russian Westernizer representatives relied mostly on the same authors than the ones promoting democracy in the West, or in the rest of the world stressing the importance of human rights, rule of law, civil society movements and political pluralism. The idea of modernizing the Russian society and becoming a real Western nation was also frequent in their discourses, even if that modernizing stance is also shared by Statist. It has known a short period of application under the very first years following the birth of the Russian Federation. That application took place – some say to the disfavor of this political movement – during troubled times for the young nation as the brutal integration to the international economy generated a certain chaos within the newly formed state; taking the shape of misery, kleptocracy and oligarchy.

It is often associated with the person of Yel'tsin and to the decade going from the fall of the USSR to the arrival of Putin to power. However, former President and Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev also represents, in a way, a figure of that movement. Even if he never opposed frontally Putin in a way that would have been destabilizing for the latter, he tried during his term to limit the progression of anti-Western sentiment among the *élites*, to enhance cooperation between Russia - West and to “normalize” Russia in regards to Western standards. Apart from those two, several leading opposition figures such as Boris Nemtsov – who died in a very dubious assassination in the center of Moscow in 2015, Mikhail Kasyanov and, more recently, Alexei Navalny crystallized liberal's ambitions on their person. It is noteworthy to state that these three had been attacked on their physical integrity, one of them up to death. Since 2012, many of those (NGOs, medias etc.) advocating for Westernism and Liberalism in Russia has been declared “foreign agents”, sued or limited in their activities as they constituted, in the eyes of the power a “fifth column” of *Dekabrists* which must be fought.

Despite its importance, that movement will only be treated sparsely in that essay because of its progressive marginalization from Russian politics and public discourse. In effect, in spite of its potential influence it has not been a leading force in the field of ideological narrative, apart from the fact that they have ‘lost’ and did not succeed to impose their discourse. It goes without saying that their eviction from the political scene did not succeed miraculously, it was rather the outcome of a ruthless repression from the official authorities to silent them, but this is not our subject.



### Subsection 1.b : Statism.

The Statist framework has been historically very present during the Tsarist, Soviet and contemporary eras. The continuous popularity of their ideas testifies of the need that Russian leaders felt, over the years, to have a strong and capable state. That ideology had strong implications on both domestic and foreign policies. It considerably gains in influence from the mid-nineties and still plays an important role in today politics. It is associated to many prominent figures of the Russian political *élites* such as: Yevgeny Primakov<sup>3</sup>, Vladimir Putin, Vladislav Surkov<sup>4</sup> and others.

It advocates for an empowerment of the Russian State in a way that it can challenge and be on an equal basis with its counterparts. Such thought ideas were very vivid in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution; the first generation of revolutionaries, and notably Josef Stalin, considered essential that the newly formed state overcomes its “backwardness”. He famously said, that Russia was “fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it, or we shall be crushed”. They equally valued, during the different phases of Russian history the strength of the Tsarist autocracy and the grip of the CPSU on politics and the civil society. Both of them preventing foreign influence – whether it was liberal, revolutionary or a ‘capitalist’ one. They also played a strong role in the development of a docile and effective administration able to execute the regime’s will. The contemporary representatives of Statism apprehend the fall of the of the Tsarist and Soviet regimes as consequence of both a failure of the State and the weakness of their leaders. That historical gaze on Russian history pushes them to try to avoid such repetition of history by trying to form a strong and infallible power.

On terms of international affairs, Statist thinkers are not *per se* opposed to the Western order. They are rather keen to make their polity a one capable to resist or to surpass those of their counterparts, especially in the field of economic and military capacities. They often referred to the need to fight the American unipolarity in the international system which took place after

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<sup>3</sup> Prime Minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Chief of the Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, a very influential political figure from the end of the nineties.

<sup>4</sup> One of Putin’s most influential political advisor which has played an important role within the Kremlin’s. First between 2000 and 2011 date of his first withdrawal, and then from 2013 working specifically on Ukraine, few month before the annexation of Crimea (in March 2014).

the fall of the USSR, arguing for the need of multipolarity and pluralism. They aspire to restore Russia as a “Great Power” within the concert of nations.

They also had an ambivalent posture towards the system of international institutions. For instance, they enjoy the position of Russia in the Security Council, but they do not share the enthusiasm towards the implementation within several UN agency of a liberal constructivist agenda, which they see as a threat to their sovereignty. They do not formally condemn the processes but they feel aggrieved by its spirit, in which they do see the Trojan horse of Westernism. They are engaged in a reasonable research of power, advocating for a realist posture and often labeling themselves as the heirs of *realpolitik*.<sup>1</sup> They do not, for instance, wish a *Reconquista* of the former Tsarist and Soviet territories under Russian law, which they consider to be a ‘reactionary utopia’; their relation towards these territories is linked to the concept of former ‘post-imperial space’. It considers the former Soviet Republics as a sphere of influence – the so-called “near abroad” – of the Russian Federation and a region whose destiny is linked to the one of Russian. Especially in terms of security, without formerly advocating for an irredentist relation of these States which are to remain sovereign but protected by Russian from the Western aspirations to hegemony (2010, Tsygankov, A. P., & Tsygankov, P. A.).

#### Subsection 1.c : Civilizationism.

That vision considers Russia as a civilization distinct than the Western one. Its vital principle does as well lay on Christianity and the Greco-Roman legacy but is characterized by the fundamental contribution of the Orthodox religion, which is to be following the true faith since the schism of 1054. It views the Western Catholic and Protestant religious systems as corrupted and decadent despite being dominative *vis-à-vis* their Orthodox brothers. The messianic idea which states that Russia, or the Russian civilization, will have the “mission’ to save Christianity, and by extension, humanity from an apocalyptic destiny is also a very vivid idea among those circles. That mystical influence, and the remaining faith in Orthodox values in Russia is considered by them to be a deep opposition regarding Western rationalism, moral crumbling and rampant atheism (2014, Engström M.) which forces to act as Russia as a “bulwark” against such a contamination.

The original mixing of Slavs, Turkic, Mongols, Greek, Finno-Ugric people within the Russian nation and their peaceful coexistence, shared values – the “base culture” – is to be a key component of the originality of that peculiar civilization. The idea that this civilizational system overlaps the borders of the Russian Federation is also taken to be a self-evident fact, the willingness towards self-sufficiency and autarky is also a frequent feature of those advocating for Civilizationism (even if it is not always the fact). However, if the spatial dimension often remains the same, the metapolitical anchorage differs in function of the ideological roots motivating the Civilizationist standpoint:

- For instance, Orthodox believers and advocate of greater role given to the Church will refer to the concept of “Holy Rus’ ” shaped by the Kirill, the Patriarchate of Moscow, a vast territory which includes Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and Kazakhstan.
- That vision also joins the one developed by Aleksander Dugin of “Eurasian civilization” which is, however, not exclusively Christian but rather “traditionalist” (accepting a diversity of religions as long as Orthodoxy remains *primus inter pares*) with some “National-Bolshevik” inputs (which many consider to be a neo-fascist posture) and which is geographically oriented towards the East instead of the West.
- Meanwhile, those nostalgic of the Soviet empire desire a return of that polity, and of its borders – which are to be extended forward – in the name of the fight against the capitalist, colonial and imperialist civilization.

We will see later on, that these three postures, which have been presented separately very often intertwine and interchange one with another. They do have common features, which substantially characterize the Civilizationist approach : the definition of the West (especially the Anglo-American civilization, and to a lesser extent the EU) as the “Other” ; an irredentist attitude towards former Soviet-Tsarist territories ; autarkic aspirations and a very vivid antagonist dimension of the relation towards the “Other”.

An interesting approach of Civilizationism can be found within Nikolai Danilevskii’s<sup>5</sup> works. One century before Samuel Huntington and half a century before Oswald Spengler, he proposed an analysis of the human civilization characterized by “historico-cultural types”

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<sup>5</sup> 1822-1885, was a Russian political philosopher, scientist and publicist who advocated for Slavophilia.

forming a division of the world in which these antagonist entities experience phases of growth, climax and decadence based on the vitality of their societies.

He figured among the first who advocated about Russia's uniqueness and to proceed to a distinction between a "Romano-Germanic Europe" and an autonomous "Slavic Russia". Thus, Russia's mission was not to try to catch-up Western Europe's standards and repairing its backwardness, but rather to pursue its own path: with its own values and sovereignty. He notably called for the annexation of Slavic territories in the Balkans, and in some Ottomans lands: forming an autonomous and self-sufficient Slavic nation. His thinking produced a strong impression in the intellectual *élites* and had an important role in the progressive shift towards a particularistic view of a Russia engaged in a hostile struggle against the West.

Danilevskii – who was a scientist – was not a strong advocate of Christian Orthodoxy but rather a Realist-Statist and militarist thinker, keen to the defense of the state and its apparatus. However, a 'crystallization' operated because of the Slavophiles between his view of Russia and the one defended by the Church and its ideological supporters. He crafted a secularized version of the messianic doctrine of salvation which would lay not anymore on the divine assistance, but on an intervention of a powerful State. He obviously disappeared from the public discourses during the Soviet era apart from some *émigrés* or underground circles in which the "Eurasianist" idea was actually formed in the thirties (2015, Laruelle M.).

The fall of the USSR and the ideological vacuum created, allowed a rediscovery and a surprising revival of his works, and those of other conservative thinkers – *émigrés* or not – among the new *élites*. Danilevskii's legacy to the Russian geopolitical thought has been deeply studied and praised, up to becoming an "unquestionable authority for today's Russia conservatives". I must recall, however, that Danilevskii's method and systematization are often considered highly unacademic and drafty (2020, Suslov M. D, Kotkyna I.). In spite of this, he is one on the most quoted authors in the field of I.R studies in Russia. (2017, Tsygankov A. P.)

The tables 1. and 2. (2010, Tsygankov, A. P., & Tsygankov, P. A.), offer a synthetic mapping of theses ideologies and of their main components.

**Table 1.** Three Russian ideologies

|        | Westernism                | Statism                                  | Civilizationism  |
|--------|---------------------------|--|--|
| Self   | Part of the West          | <i>Derzhava</i> , or independent state   | Independent civilization   |
| Other  | Non-Western world         | States threatening Russia's independence | Western and non-Western civilizations                                  |
| Action | Integration with the West | Building a normal great power            | Resisting Western pressures or Promoting inter-civilizational dialogue |

**Table 2.** Ideologies, theories and concepts in Russian IR: Some examples

| Ideologies      | Theories              | Concepts                                  |   |   |
|-----------------|-----------------------|---|---|---|
|                 |                       | International System                      | Regional Order  | Foreign Policy Objective  |
| Westernism      | Liberalism            | Democratic unipolarity (Kulagin)          | End of Eurasia (Trenin)   | Atlanticism and integration with the West (Kozyrev)<br>Liberal empire (Chubais)   |
| Statism         | Realism               | Pluralistic unipolarity (Bogaturov)       | Post-imperial space (Karaganov)                                     | A multi-vector orientation (Primakov)   |
| Civilizationism | Cultural Essentialism | Great war of continents (Dugin)           | New Eurasia (Dugin)<br>Orthodox empire ( <i>Russkaya doktrina</i> ) | Heartland of Eurasia (Dugin)<br>Self-sufficiency ( <i>Russkaya doktrina</i> )   |
|                 | Constructivism        | Pluralism of civilizations (Shakhnazarov) | Euro-East (Pavlovski)   | Humanistic globalism and cultural dialogue (Gorbachev)<br>Orthodox synthesis of Western reason and Eastern myth (Panarin) |

## *Section 2 : The adoption of the Civilizationist Standpoint.*

### Subsection 2.a : A Genealogy of the Russian Federation Attitude towards Civilizationism.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was, in the words of President Putin, the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”. This catastrophe, however, was not only geopolitical, and the leaders of the newly formed state understood it very well. They were all born within a polity which had an ideology, a coherent metapolitical discourse, a worldview and a clear relation towards its neighbors. The metapolitical vacuum which followed was an evident subject of worry. Several attempts tried to craft a national *ethos* able to replace the Sovietic one and to tackle that “ontological insecurity”.

A competition among different narratives and their representatives started in the nineties: mainly between Modernizers (Democratic Liberal and Westernizers) and Anti-liberal/Conservative (most of the Statists and Civilizationists). Interestingly, their domestic political anchorage also reflected their relation towards the West. The first being mostly enthusiast and the second being mostly dubious or reluctant to cooperate.

The adoption of the Civilizationist standpoint was a progressive process which started in the late nineties among some prominent figures of the Russian political *élites* and the intelligentsia. We can extract some relevant internal and external factors which have motivated the choice of the *élites* to opt for that narrative. We can also note that this choice had concrete effects and is widely fed in official discourses, foreign and domestic policies and in the symbolic production of concept and imagery.

If the Russian politics of the nineties were dominated by Modernizers with Gorbachev and the Yel'tsin administration, they quickly met an intense resistance notably with the growing influence of Yevgeny Primakov. The assumption of power of the Putin administration marks a milestone in this struggle between competing narratives. Retrospectively, we can note that Putin himself, in the decade following his election as President, had a positive relation *vis-à-vis* the West and has shown willingness to cooperate with the Euro-Atlantic alliance despite the bombing of Serbian forces in 1999 and the Eastern expansions of NATO – two international sequences which Russia firmly condemned. If the modernizing narrative was still present in his two first terms, (2000-2008), a series of events, which occurred during this time lapse and during Dmitri Medvedev (2008-2012) presidential mandate<sup>6</sup>, participated to a change of paradigm.

In effect, the 2000's was a time of affirmation of the young Federation which benefited from the rising of gas and oil prices. It was harshly challenged domestically by the Second Chechen war<sup>7</sup> (1999-2009) and the series of terrorist attacks on its soil. The management of these crises shed a crude light on the attachment of the Putin administration to human rights. Voices started

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<sup>6</sup> The so-called 'Putin-Medvedev tandemocracy' which occurred because of the constitutional limitation of a maximum of two consecutive mandates as President of the Russian Federation. A constitutional provision that was amended in 2020, allowing the President to go for another round of mandates.

<sup>7</sup> Which was mostly a counter-insurgency war taking place in the Chechen Republic but also in the neighboring Republics and in Georgia.

to raise in Russia to denounce the crimes of the regime during that conflict, mostly among liberal politicians, Russian and foreign journalists, and NGOs which provoked the ire of the regime who saw it as maneuvers in order to narrow its sovereignty and attempts to destabilize Russia. They decided to respond to it by imposing restriction on freedom of press and they tightened surveillance on NGOs and foreign actors (2016, Tsygankov A. P.) The assertion of a growing nationalist discourse and the harsh repression in Chechenia occurred with a relative silence from Western chancelleries that did not considered this issue as a strategic one for them.

The real change and the shift from a normal relation vis-à-vis Western countries to a more aggressive stance came, however, from external threats. The war in the Balkans and the decision of Western powers to side along the opponent of Serbia revived the old Pan Slavic idea according to which, Slavs were always threatened and dominated by their Western counterparts. That intervention opened the gate to a growing criticism of the West among the Russian civil society. Some Pan-Slavic and nationalist groups even addressed a letter to the Congress of the United States, warning them that “NATO’s military aggression in Serbia is being considered as a military challenge to Russia (...) We are going to help our brother Serbs by all available means.” (2012, Suslov M. D.).

In the aftermath of the operations, the dead bodies of Russian officers were found among the rubbles. This episode vividly recalled the one of the Russo-Turkish War of 1878<sup>8</sup> in which the Russian Empire freed the Balkans of the Ottoman domination and allowed the birth of the Serbian state. This was also viewed in Russia as a liberation of the Balkan’s Orthodox population from the Islamic caliphate. This conflict was symbolically very important in Imperial Russia, many volunteers joining the army in that struggle for the Slavic and Orthodox “brothers”. The same ties of fraternity and natural alliance also led to the intervention of Russia in the war declared by the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the Kingdom of Serbia, which was the premise of the First World War.

Such historical parallels were, indeed, not favorable to a good perception of the West among the Russian society and its political class. The religious and ethnic ties, the sentiment of “brotherhood”, and the sacrifices made throughout history have given a bitter taste and added

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<sup>8</sup> That conflict lasted for 10 month and ended with a Russian led-coalition victory. It is not a very well-known conflict but it had major geopolitical consequences, notably the restoration of the Bulgarian state and the accession to full sovereignty of Romania and Serbia.

suspicion to NATO-Russian relations. The cultural impact of the NATO intervention in Russia must have been considered by the Western powers a secondary one. The motif invoked by the NATO forces to launch this operation was the necessity of a “humanitarian intervention”. From the perspective of Western leaders, ending the occupation of Kosovo that was taking place and the massacres that occurred over the course of the occupation can be a valid reason to do so. However, the Russian administration never accepted this argument and kept criticizing the operation, notably the “humanitarian” argument. This concept will crystallize anxiety among the Russian *élite*, especially since the fourth and fifth waves of enlargement of NATO placed the limits of the alliance along the Russian border<sup>9</sup>.

In a same fashion (even if the argument was not humanitarian), the invasion of Irak in 2003 and the war which followed, participated to craft a negative perception of the West for Russian authorities. The “humanitarian” argument popped up again to overthrow the regime of Muammar Ghaddafi in Lybia, with, again a NATO military coalition and upon mandate of the UN. Russian authorities considered the “humanitarian” argument mostly hypocritical. They asserted – and still assert nowadays – that this argument, alongside an entire vocabulary<sup>10</sup> was one of the many metapolitical instruments used by the West to advance their pawns in a geopolitical battlefield and to threaten Russia’s integrity. Russian officials started then to see that the ‘revolutions against autocrats’ that occurred within the globe and that were backed by Western officials, might be an existential threat to its own stability. Their fears were of course justified by the effective promotion of democracy and liberalism by the United States and the European Union, in their international relations.

It seems, however, that Russia started to fear for its safety in the aftermath of the ‘colored revolutions’ and most notably during the Orange revolution taking place in Ukraine where Russia, effectively lost a significant influence over the country. They were due to the contestation of the presidential election results, which ended with the victory of the ‘pro-Russian’ candidate (Yanoukovich) at the expense the pro-Western one (Yushchenko). The election was cancelled by the Supreme Court. A new one was convoked and the pro-Western candidate won with a significant majority (55% vs. 45%). The demonstrators also denounced

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<sup>9</sup> In the Baltic states and in several former Soviet republics.

<sup>10</sup> Words such as ‘freedom fighters’, ‘colored revolutions’, ‘Arab spring’, ‘democratic protesters’ etc.



the grip of Russia and the ‘Donetsk clan’<sup>11</sup> over the country. A similar sequence of events happened ten years later, during the Euromaidan and the Ukrainian Revolution of 2014 which, again, ousted Yanoukovich from the power, in the expense of a pro-European government, which will culminate in 2015 with the election of Poroshenko as President of Ukraine.

The pivotal of Ukraine in the bosom of the NATO alliance, which – via the US – openly supported the revolution and financed pro-Europeans initiatives was perceived by the Russian *élites* as a great danger and an additional threat to its sovereignty. That loss, given the importance of Ukraine in the foundation of Russian nation, fed worries of a ‘regime change’ in Russia and nourished enmity *vis-à-vis* the “theft” of Ukraine. That notion of theft also echoes the very vivid idea in Russia that Ukraine belongs to Russia and is an inseparable part of its culture and identity and is part of Russia.

We can get an idea of the Kremlin’s opinion on this precise topic by recalling the unequivocal statement of Vladislav Surkov, Putin’s former favorite propagandist and political advisor, in the columns of the *Financial Times*: “Ukrainians are very well aware that for the time being, their country does not really exist. I have said that it could exist in the future. The national core exists. I am just asking the question as to what the borders, the frontier should be (...) I am proud that I was part of the reconquest [of Crimea]. This was the first open geopolitical counter-attack by Russia [against the west] and such a decisive one. That was an honour for me” (2021, Foy H.)<sup>12</sup>

This invites us to try to understand more in depth the response that Russian officials crafted in order to tackle the narrative of Western democracies. Civilizationism allowed the Russian *élites* to reject Western globalism, progressive agenda and democratization while remaining an influent actor within the globalized order, emphasizing on distinctiveness. A distinctiveness which, in the eyes of the Kremlin’s, did not allowed the West to judge, apprehend and understand Russia and Russian politics because of that ontological difference. Thus, the Russian “civilization” would become a hermetic and self-sufficient system free from Western influence and its harmful attempts to amend Russia.

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<sup>11</sup> Pro-Russian businessman and politicians which are originating from the city of Donetsk, the largest city of Donbass, a territory which is still today the theatre of clashes between pro-Russian militias and Ukrainian forces.

<sup>12</sup> I will not go into further details on this concept of geopolitical mastery of the “post-imperial space”, neither will I mention the Kirghiz and Georgian revolution and the Russo-Georgian War as those topics will be discussed in a future chapter. See Ch. III.

A question remains in understanding if Russian created *ex nihilo* a distance between Russia and the West, or if an already existing difference was extended between the élites thanks to political propaganda-communication. This is not a question I pretend to be able to answer. However, analogies can be drawn with countries with a similar religious, political and historical background. The case of Ukraine, which shares a lot in common with Russia and is the most comparable example of normalization shows us that it could have been possible, and that Russia is not by essence to be engaged in a struggle towards its Western competitors. That very topic is treated in an article (2020, Robinson P. F.) but its subtitle's question: "Russian Conservatism: an Ideology or a Natural Attitude", is not solved by the paper. Its author's argument is that Russia state is coming back to its pre-1917 role as a conservative and counter-revolutionary power<sup>13</sup>.

The Russian *élites* – genuinely or not – stated that the current development of the Western model was going against the interest and the ethic of the Russian people. The normalization and the progressive extension of rights in the West given to LGBTs for instance was considered by Russia to be a threat to its identity and religiousness. That further increased the sentiment among Russian to be the tenants of a besiege "Fortress". More surprisingly, a majority of Russians seemed to embrace and support that idea<sup>14</sup> (2017, Ch. 7, Melville A.) and a growing defiance towards the West speeded while a vivid nationalist sentiment, fed by Revanchism, was spreading among the population.

Thus, the famous concept of 'sovereign democracy', imagined by Surkov developed in the late 2000's. Its best description remains the one given by its architect himself, in one of his lyrical apology of the characteristics of Putinism. He says: "Octavian came to power when the nation, the people, were wary of fighting. He created a different type of state. It was not a republic any more (...) he preserved the formal institutions of the Republic – there was a senate, there was a tribune. But everyone reported to one person and obeyed him. Thus, he married the wishes of the republicans who killed Caesar, and those of the common people who wanted a direct dictatorship, (...) Putin did the same with democracy. He did not abolish it. He married it with the monarchical archetype of Russian governance. This archetype is working. It is not going anywhere (...) It has enough freedom and enough order." (2021, Foy H.). That notion

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<sup>13</sup> See Ch. II.

<sup>14</sup> See Ch. I.

has then been completed with the one of state-civilization (*Gosurdarstvo-tsvilizatsiia*) which ‘enriches’ the latter. Placing itself among other nations, such as China, India or Iran (Persia would be precise in our case) whose civilization identity and “essence” is contained within the state. An alleged combination of (multi-)ethnic characteristics, religious and political beliefs which are exclusively shared by the population allows the Kremlin occupiers to portray themselves as the heirs of a civilization which is neither inserted in the European one, nor in a ‘Eastern’ one but an original and distinct one.

That narrative is explicitly completed by the ideologeme of ‘imminent peril’ which this civilization is facing, because external and internal enemies which try by all possible means to narrow its unity and to change its values. That self-evident assertion then implies an agonistic ethic towards those considered as ‘enemies’ and mobilizes a conservative posture *vis-à-vis* the social environment.

However, before fully investigating this issue, I would like to provide data on the popularity of this narrative.

#### Subsection 2.b : “Russia” as a Distinct and Unique Civilization : a Popular Narrative.

Western liberal-democratic theory has been nourished since the eighteenth century by the idea that human-beings are inclined to seek freedom, equality and individual happiness. Those ideals certainly played a major role in crafting the *ethos* and the moral of westerners. The belief of the universality of these ideals was very vivid through the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This can be found among major figures of Western political thoughts that participated to spread that idea: from Rousseau and Voltaire to Kant, Beccaria, Mill, Tocqueville up to today with Jurgen Habermas or John Rawls<sup>15</sup>.

It has been complex for liberals and democrats to grasp the growing importance of illiberalism and its popularity among the civil society in Russia. This part will share some data relative to this astonishing support of the Civilizationist idea and of Russia’s conservatism; up to the point to be described as a “symphony” played by the citizens, the *élites* and the Kremlin (2017, Ch. 5, Melville A.)

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<sup>15</sup> This ‘school’ was of course challenged by Conservative, Socialists and Civilizationists thinkers etc. However, the influence and the progressive democratization in the Western world certainly ended in making this idea a central one in Western political theory.

Marlène Laruelle, in an inspiring article (2020, Laruelle M.), describes the nature of Putin’s regime and of how politics are functioning in Russia with a partial consent of the Russian people. She describes the Russians politics as an “implicit social contract with the population that is continuously renegotiated and limits the regime’s options. To continue to maintain its societal relevance, the regime is on a permanent quest to draw inspiration from and co-opt grassroots trends, and there are many bottom-up dynamics that western observers often ignore. Secondly, the internal configuration of the regime itself resembles a conglomerate of competing opinions; it is not a uniform, cohesive group”. Contrarily to what is often believed and asserted in the West she deconstructs the idea of a monolithic Kremlin ruled by its almighty Tsar. She completes, quoting Gleb Pavlovsky<sup>16</sup> : “ ‘The Kremlin’s politics looks like a jazz group: an uninterrupted improvisation as an attempt to survive the latest crisis.’ Indeed, as in jazz, there is an established common theme or point, but each player is allowed to improvise at will.”

It is interesting, to observe if these narratives, crafted by intellectuals and officials have efficiently penetrated the Russian society. The following table (2020; Hale, H. E., & Laruelle, M.) provide by a bottom-up analysis on this matter. The authors tried to verify if the official’s discourse was in line with the sentiments of the civil society by collecting datas from surveys :

**Table 3.** “People often discuss the place of Russia in the world. Tell me please, do you consider Russia to be part of European civilization or something else? Please choose the answer that you think is most correct” (estimated percentage of population giving each answer, from NEORUSS 2013 and 2014 surveys, question 37).

| Options given to choose from  | 2013 | 2014 |
|---|------|------|
| 1. Russia is primarily a part of European civilization ( <i>evropeiskaia tsivilizatsiia</i> )                                     | 23   | 17   |
| 2. Russia is primarily a part of Asian (eastern) civilization ( <i>aziatskaia tsivilizatsiia</i> )                                | 7    | 8    |
| 3. Russia is a combination of European and Asian (eastern) civilizations ( <i>smes' evropeiskoi i aziatskoi tsivilizatsii</i> )   | 31   | 31   |
| 4. Russia is a separate civilization, not a part of European or Asian (eastern) civilization ( <i>otdel'naia tsivilizatsiia</i> ) | 32   | 35   |
| Hard to say or refuse   | 8    | 10   |

For this table and all other calculations from these data, we adjust standard errors for regional clustering and use weights to adjust the NEORUSS sample to country population statistics.

We can see that the respondents broadly share the narrative crafted by the Kremlin (answer 3. and 4.) and that the idea of a civilization “separated” from Western and Asian anchorage gained in popularity among (+3%) the respondents from one year to another.

<sup>16</sup> A former Soviet dissident, now a political scientist.

Looking at the following table (2020; Hale, H. E., & Laruelle, M.) we can observe that the Russian people appears to be more zealous than the Kremlin itself. In effect, they conceptualize Russia more likely as a “separate” civilization than a component of the “European” one. The archives of the Kremlin mentioned Russia as part of the “European civilization” in 46% of its usages of the words, only 29% of those characterized Russia as its “own civilization” and 13% of Russia being a member of the “Eurasianist” civilization.

**Table 2.** By type, the frequency of Russian presidents’ usages of the term “civilization” (or its adjectival forms) in public remarks archived in the official presidential website Kremlin.ru, 2000–2014.

| Type of usage                                   | Number of usages | Percent of usages |
|---|------------------|-------------------|
| Civilization in the sense of world civilization | 173              | 60%               |
| Civilization as culture of another country      | 63               | 22%               |
| Russia as part of:                              | 52               | 18%, of which...  |
| - European civilization                         | 24               | 46%               |
| - Christian civilization                        | 6                | 12%               |
| - Eurasian civilization                         | 7                | 13%               |
| - Its own civilization                          | 15               | 29%               |

*Compiled by the authors from the official website of the President of the Russian Federation, Kremlin.ru.*

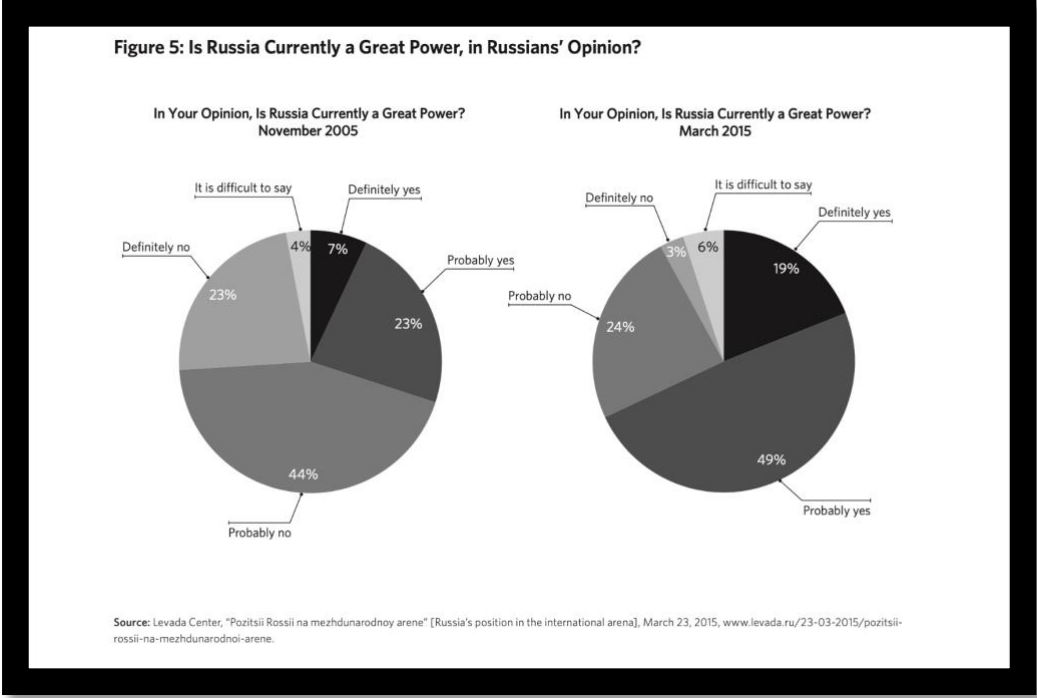
However, the length (from 2000 to 2014) covered by the survey incites to moderation in the interpretation of these data. Russia’s position on that substantially evolved during that time-lapse as it has been shown in the latter sub-section (Ch. I, Section 2, Subsection 2.a).

It is worth noting that references to a civilizational anchorage by the authorities contains an opportunistic (one could say a cynical) dimension following the context in which it is employed. For instance, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula was referred to it as a move made to protect the “Orthodox civilization”, echoing to the souvenir of Vladimir the Great – founder of the Kievan Rus’ – converted to Christianity on that land. A posture which was supposed to a natural right to Russia for the annexation of “an inseparable part of Russia”<sup>17</sup>.

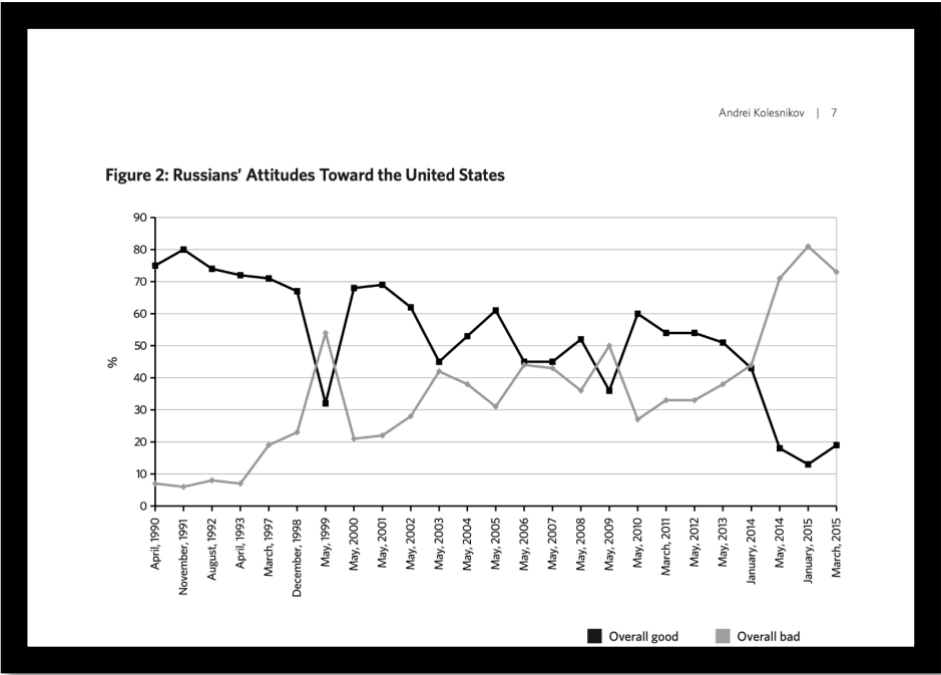
The idea of a restauration of scorned national pride is very present in today’s politics and discourses since the mid-2000s and the U-turn from modernization to Civilizationism. The ‘victory’ and the taking-back of a Russian land at the expense of the West from the bloodless reconquest of Crimea was a great moment of emulation among nationalist circles, within the

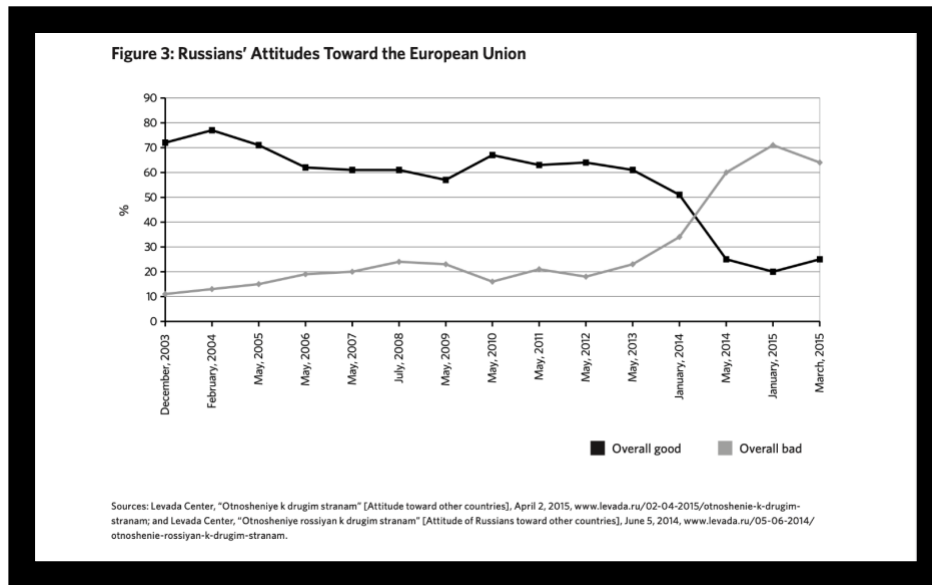
<sup>17</sup> In the words of Putin himself.

medias and also among the Russian population itself. These data from the Levada Center testify (2015, Kolesnikov) that the level of popularity of Putin's, 89%, and his policies have skyrocketed during that episode in which Russia would have regained its "Great Power" status.



This nationalistic impetus is also fed by international relations and the structuring relation that the Russian state and its civil society has with the West. The graphs shown below (2015, Kolesnikov) expose this dynamic. It seems that Western world's opposition acts as a carburant to Putin's domestic legitimacy and worsened the belief in the vulnerability of Russia's ethos.





These data testify of the consensus over of the so-called ‘cultural turn’ adopted by Putin during his third term as Russian President which will be developed in our next chapter. They also show the special nature of the degree of satisfaction that Russian place in their country; that degree of satisfaction being often correlated to a degree of dissatisfaction or opposition *vis-à-vis* the Western world.

## **Chapter II : The “Cultural Turn”, Metapolitics and the Question of Ideology.**

In this chapter, I will further develop the implications of the adoption of the Civilizationist stance by the Kremlin. I argue that the progressive adoption of this narrative by the *élites* participated to shape the new ideology of the regime. This question of an “official ideology” is, however, not a consensual one within the academia since the regime’s behavior is somehow inconstant and erratic. Yet, we can find some relevant constancies that may lead us to believe it.

### *Section 1 : Russia’s Illiberalism, a Metapolitical Reply to the Western Model.*

#### **Subsection 1.a : Shaping the New Russian Idea ?**

This section is going to reflect the question of a possible metamorphosis of the ‘Russian idea’ – a concept inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century – in the form of the Putinist state and of neo-conservatism. This is, at least, what several scholars perceived in the current ideologization of

politics. It seems that the apparition of references to spirituality, ‘Russian values’ etc. in every-day politics, reveal what has been called by scholars the “turn towards traditionalist values” (2017, Robinson N.). Russian leaders, from Putin’s third-term successfully gave the primacy to identity politics at the expense of social, distributive and anti-corruption questions.

I will try to highlight that references to the Russian idea and the consolidation of this concept constitutes a metapolitical assertion which finds its roots in Russian neo-conservatism, mysticism and historical references. This reveals the ideological nature of this policy as it needs to be constantly fed by imagery, symbols and antimodern worldviews. I suggest by the expression ‘antimodern worldview’ the refusal of the development of power relations and manners as they are in the West: characterized by ideas such as Progressism or egalitarianism. Even though such a large, encompassing view of ‘western politics’ is highly and – maybe intentionally – reductive<sup>18</sup>. We will see, that the attempt to form a national ideology has been a relative failure with regards to what the Sovietic state achieved in the past century.

That conservative posture is justified by the *élites* with references to the now well-known peril that the state-civilization endures in his struggle against his enemies. This international struggle for “ideocracy” (2017, Melville A.) must be carried on in the name of Russia’s uniqueness and singular *grandeur*. Putin himself, in his Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, argued that the conservation of the Russian identity should be the very first mission of the state, particularly because of the extraordinary survival of Russia to its two former collapses: The Tsarist and the Soviet one. He considers that is the evidence of the existence of an ‘essence’ that, independently of the polity or the crises it endured, has stayed vivid and has perpetuated a ‘mission’ of the Russian state. He refers explicitly to an “organic”, unseizable essence of the Russia state-civilization that cannot be modified. The question if Putin himself believes in these narratives would be an interesting asset; one might say it is just cynic from his part and the Kremlin rhetoric would certainly lead him to reply that this demonstrates the West’s post-modernist vacuity. Nevertheless, he consistently relies on these narratives in his public communications (2013, Putin V.).

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<sup>18</sup> I refer to the language of the Russian political *élite*. I personally do not think that, despite the strong political integration of Western states we can speak of such a thing when referring to the US, to Japan, Spain or Estonia. The diversity of these regimes which only have in common the democratic form of their states do not, I would say, allow such parallels to be drawn. The real target of that discourse is more likely to be the NATO or simply the US who often are Russia’s real antagonist “Other”.



He also often makes references to an overwhelming majority which, he says, supports his policies and believe in the virtues of conservatism. Thus, trying to change or to modify Russia's moral values would be "essentially anti-democratic, since it is carried out on the basis of abstract, speculative ideas, contrary to the will of the majority, which does not accept the changes occurring or the proposed revision of values (...) the values of traditional families, real human life, including religious life, not just material existence but also spirituality, the values of humanism and global diversity." (2017, Robinson N.)

The political stance, that the Kremlin's strategists opted for, is often associated, especially in the Western medias – but also in Russia<sup>19</sup> – as a return or a revival of the imperial power structure that Russia built in the modern era. Presidentialism<sup>20</sup> is by nature likely to produce a form of profusion of powers within the hands of a single person. Criticisms arose within presidential or semi-presidential systems about a tendency to "cesarism" that was inherently linked to this form of government. That is even more the case in today's Russia where the institutional framework is openly by-passed by the ruling *élites* of the presidential administration. In addition, ubiquitous reference to the glories of the Imperial and Soviet past also shapes the relation to power that the political leaders, first and foremost Putin himself, actually have. It is closely linked to the neo-patrimonialism functioning in higher sphere of the Russian state. It can be defined as hybrid form of state in which the very high personification of the power leads to a discrepancy between the legal order and the actual distribution of power. A paroxysmal illustration of that, appears in the famous annual TV show "Direct line with President Putin". A long<sup>21</sup> TV program, organized and patronized by the Kremlin's press Secretary while the President answers an extreme diversity of questions, including pensions, increase in prices, international relations, farming issues, local governance etc.... "All" Russian citizens are then allowed to address a grievance to the President. That 'direct line' exercise remains, however, poorly transparent since no question related to the hot-topics are addressed to the President.

That ideology, however, remains relatively unstable as it is only, in the words of Lev Gudkov an "eclectic mix of all previous justifications of Russian nationalism. The rehabilitation of Stalin and the soviet state system are combined here with the glorification of the tsar's ministers

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<sup>19</sup> Let's remember for instance Surkov's mention of Putin as a "new Octavian" Rome's first "Caesar" or Tsar in Russian.

<sup>20</sup> I mean Presidentialism as a kind of polity (as parliamentarism etc.).

<sup>21</sup> 3 hours and 43 minutes for the last edition (06/31/2021).

and generals with an increase of militarist rhetoric with orthodoxy, pious censure of culture, media and education with a ban on critical analysis of the soviet past” (2017 Gudkov L.). Justified probably because of the lack of experience of the regime<sup>22</sup> and the desire to maintain a degree of liberty to the Russian people.

The nationalism that Russia is trying to adopt as its official doctrine is, however, characterized by a specificity linked to the Russian history. The Russian state and the Russian Nation did not have the same socio-historical genesis than its western European counterparts. Emil Pain (Pain E., 2016) argues that Russian nationalism<sup>23</sup> is characterized by what he called the persistence of an “imperial syndrome” which gives a special tonality to this “imperial nationalism”. Pain points out a sum of ideas which have characterized Russian nationalism since the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the primacy of the Russian ethnic group among the other; an essentialist view of Russia; and the “defensive imperial character”: the preservation of the autocratic nature of the State and of its territories at all expense. These characteristics, at this stage of the essay, are nothing new to us, as the very interesting part it yet to come. Pain alleges that the “imperial syndrome” is deployed and nourished through three main aspects of the nation’s relation to power (“imperial order”), to geo-politics (“the imperial body”) and to its national ethos (“the imperial consciousness”):

- The “imperial order”: must be understood as the fact that in Russia, political authority derives not from the will of the people but by the will of the sovereign, which Pain recalls the very first mission as “imperator”.
- The ‘imperial body’: echoes to the power relationship that links the geography of the Russian lands to their history. A history which is characterized by territorial gains at the expense of indigenous peoples and which is, by many aspects, linked to colonialism. Such rule of an immense geography is to be characterized by unequal power relations, making these lands “subject” of the Empire or of the Federation.
- The “imperial consciousness”: which is, in the words of the author, “connected with the geopolitical essentialism that arises in two interrelated notions: first, that of a special Russian civilization eternally preserved in the ‘Russian soul’; and second, that of

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<sup>22</sup> Whose history has been relatively calm in comparison to the Soviet ones which created a new form of state, was the geographical matrix of a global ideology, had a worldwide influence and ‘saved the civilization’ by defeating the Nazi Germany.

<sup>23</sup> The one linked to *narodnost* or “official nationality”, not ethnic nationalism.

Western civilization presenting a continual threat to Russian civilization” (Pain E., 2016).

The popping-up of these ideologemes is frequent in Russia. It is often mobilized by the Russian *élites* since they occupy a central place among public discussions on the essence of the nation’s ethos.

According to most of the literature (2020, Laruelle M. ; 2012 March L. ; 2017 Robinson N. ; 2017 Melville A.), if an official state ideology or national idea has not been built so far, the power managed however to create a consensus over its conservative agenda. Nevertheless, this cannot be compared in any way to the symbolic charge that Communism played. Most probably because of the lack of experience of the regime<sup>24</sup> and the desire to maintain a degree of liberty to the Russian people. It does not neither have the universality or the vibrant messianic message that Slavophile philosophers and Orthodox enthusiasts deployed in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Those policies arduously produce positive effects and significant changes within Russian society apart a sharpening of the nationalist mindset. One might say that they seem to be designed to maintain a *status quo* which favors the ruling *élite* and prevent any grassroots mobilization that might try to change the current algorithm whether it is in a harder or smoother way (2017, Melville A.). Or rather, as this theme is reappearing among the civil society, to the idea of “*zastoi*, stagnation” which echoes the slow, never-ending era of Brezhnev which led to collapse of the USSR (2017, Robinson N.)

However, the regime successfully institutionalized an entire ‘ecosystem’ of conservative and patriotic organizations, think-tanks and clubs, forming the new vanguard of Russia’s specific nationalist thinking. These loyalist publicists<sup>25</sup>, whose diversity goes from ethno-nationalist, to Monarchist or Stalinian once again reflect the heterogeneity and the absence of consistency of Putin’s ideology that Mr. Gudkov pointed out. Effectively, in spite of publicly criticizing these ideologies – which are considered by the Kremlin as dangerous or dated – their representatives are sometimes used by the political *élite* in order to gain in popularity within the population’s most radical segments or to enhance certain policies.

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<sup>24</sup> Whose history has been relatively calm in comparison to the Soviet ones which created a new form of state, was the geographical matrix of a global ideology, had a worldwide influence and ‘saved the civilization’ by defeating the Nazi Germany.

<sup>25</sup> See Ch. II Section 3.

Finally, it is noteworthy to highlight the fact that Russia has – with a great efficiency – penetrated the Western ideological and mediatic ecosystem. The Kremlin’s effective support to Euroscepticist and conservative fringes of the political spectrum testifies of that tendency. This can be seen in the public support to political leaders such as Marine Le Pen in the French 2017 presidential election. It is trying to draw the contours of a ‘conservative international movement’ (2020, Robinson P. F.) which could be able to challenge what Russia views as a liberal hegemony in the West. Among diplomatic and official means of support<sup>26</sup> Russia fully exploits the potentiality of information warfare. All possible ladders of action are activated. From the public Russia Today (RT) channels<sup>27</sup> and Sputnik websites, to the cyber-attacks or the infamous Russian “farm bots” which make use of the social medias algorithm in order to influence information or social interactions in what Russia considers to be its best interest. That international metapolitical struggle, however, is not the matter of this chapter but will be developed in a following one<sup>28</sup>. We could say, synthetically, that what Russian leaders say seems to believe that it can shape an alternative *zeitgeist* characterized by an exportation of Russian conservative ideas and traditional values among the Western world.

#### Subsection 1.b : Counter-Revolutionary Politics under Putin.

This subsection will mostly try to highlight the growing tendency which, since the 2010’s, characterizes the relation of the Putin state towards the radical opposition<sup>29</sup> and the parts of the civil society which is not willing to conform to the Kremlin’s political project. Recent actuality also provides some examples of Russia’s tendency to implement counter-revolutionary policies. The reaction to the protests which followed Alexei Navalny’s arrest, and to the protests against the regime in Belarus certainly constitute a milestone in the Kremlin’s political apparatus toward the management of these crisis. The first presented some undeniable reminiscences of the events of 2011-12 but with, this time, a more defined leading figure in the person of Navalny whose image, use of social medias and public relation campaign – notably

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<sup>26</sup> Notably financial, informative or logistical support.

<sup>27</sup> Which is now diffused in German, French, Spanish, Arabic, and English.

<sup>28</sup> See Ch. IV.

<sup>29</sup> I refer here to the ‘real’ opposition, the one which challenges the governance implemented by the Kremlin and is *ipso facto* targeted by the authorities. It must not be confused with the ‘official opposition’ which, as we will see in the following part, is somehow a complicit of the current state of affairs.

with the FBK<sup>30</sup> and his famous video of “Putin’s palace” – was better organized than in 2011-12. A similar behavior can also be found in Russia’s attitude in its attempt to secure its ally, and quasi-brother-nation of Belarus in the context of the waves of protests against Lukashenko’s regime. I do not intend to develop these points, not yet been treated in the literature, but we can affirm without risk that they constituted a marked continuity with the Kremlin’s counter-revolutionary agenda, to both domestic and regional purposes.

There is a certain irony in the fact that, a hundred year after the revolutionary creation of the USSR, a back-to-basics Russia implements, just like a century ago, counter-revolutionary politics against its opposition, dissident voices and “enemies”. That, I would say, is no coincidence. The Russia political *élite* has been shaped by the harshness of the nineties and the widespread uncertainty that undoubtedly constituted a milestone for that generation. As we mentioned in the previous subsection: conservatism in its original mission of ‘conserving’ and assuring domestically the *status quo* is certainly an option which satisfies the government. The counter-revolutionary school of thought and the policies it deploys are can be found in several aspects the country’s politics. Counter-revolutionarism is inherited from the philosophical and political attitude that monarchist and conservatives developed during the French revolution. The school however perpetuated itself long after the restauration of the monarchy in France. It was during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries a very vivid political force in Europe in authoritarian regimes. It often took the form a police state which implied a strict control of the social activities within the polity. Counter-revolutionary is closely linked in Western Europe to the political thought of Joseph de Maistre or Edmund Burke. In Russia, however, we could quote for instance Konstantin Leontiev, Fyodor Dostoyevsky or Nikolai Danilevskii and to the political *praxis* which Tsarist Russia and its political apparatus enhanced in its struggle against Socialists, Communists and Anarchists from the late 1870’s to the Civil War – with, however some notable changes in terms of intensity during that time-lapse.

Going back to our contemporary matters, we can track the apparition of counter-revolutionary politics to the upcoming of political protests in the mid-2000’s. The ‘Dissenters marches’ which took place from December 2006 to May 2007 in the biggest Russian cities constituted an attempt, organized by the political oppositions, to influence the course of Russian politics. Those marches reunited nearly all factions of the political spectrum under the same

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<sup>30</sup> The Anti-Corruption Fund, which has been “liquidated” in 2019 and declared an “extremist organization” in June 2021.

banner of ‘discontent’ *vis-à-vis* the current development of politics in Russia. These marches reunited members of the liberal opposition such as the chess World champion Garry Kasparov or the former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov which marched alongside the Communist, Far-left and National-Bolsheviks such as Eduard Limonov<sup>31</sup> or Sergei Udaltsov<sup>32</sup> in the so-called “Other Russia” coalition. The coalition, however, did not successfully managed to merger these oppositions and the civil society in forming a potential threat to the regime. This was, however, a test for the regime which, from this sequence of events strengthen his grip on the society and launched an offensive against these new *Dekabrists*.

We can see that the waves of protests going from 2011 to 2012 has been tackled in a much more organized way and that the regime responded to it efficiently. The protests begin from the contestation of the result of the State Duma elections (which saw a victory of United Russia with 49% of the votes). Most of the opposition figures, as well as a subsequent part of domestic and foreign medias challenged the official result and came back, as in 2006-2007 asking for a more transparent political life, a fairer distribution of power and political alternancy. Despite the chronical “inarticulation” of the opposition, the importance of the movement could not be ignored by the political class. The response from the Kremlin was, this time, well-organized and efficient. I will not go into a complete chronology of the events which would be messy and too long as these protests deployed during several months in Russia’s main cities. The peak of this crisis is however reached on the protest of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of May 2012, the day before Putin’s third assumption to power. On that day, the police’s response to the demonstrators was particularly violent. The police also successfully captured the main leaders of the protest: Nemtsov, Udaltsov and Navalny among several thousands of demonstrators. Cyber-attacks also targeted the most famous oppositions medias and forced them to silence. That tactical initiative was also backed in the streets by a new force: the ‘Nashi’ movement. That patriotic youth organization had created in 2005 and operated a connection with the state under the aegis of Vladislav Surkov. It was designed to provide upon request displays of power to Putinist state and to emphasize the presence of patriotic and loyalist demonstrators in the streets. (2014, Sharafutdinova, G.). Always in the same way, loyalist rallies were organized by Putin supporters which did not belonged to the Nashi movement or to the Kremlin’s apparatus. These pro-Putin rallies ended up in Moscow’s Luzhniki Stadium with Putin delivering a vibrant patriotic speech to his supporters, asserting his fair victory at the Presidential election and

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<sup>31</sup> (1943-2020) Founder of the National-Bolshevik party, also a former Soviet dissident and author.

<sup>32</sup> (1977-present) Founder of the Vanguard of the Red Youth.

harshly criticizing the enemies of Russia. Russian officials and, first and foremost Putin, recycled the old ideologeme of “foreign enemies” and domestic traitors who wanted to undermine the country’s sovereignty.

Effectively, the importance of the events taking place in Russia were recalling the ones which occurred during the ‘Colored revolution’ and most specifically during the Orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004 (2019, Luxmoore, M.). The “Anti-Orange Committee”, created by the Soviet-nostalgist and nationalist Sergei Kurginyan was composed of groups of people whose main desire was to maintain Russia’s sovereignty against the “plague” of the Orange revolution. It was composed mostly by Statists and Civilizationists which embraced the anti-liberal and anti-Western stance of the political *élites*. A merger of theoretically political forces occurred during these events as for instance the neo-fascist, Eurasianist and traditionalist Aleksander Dugin and the Stalinian nationalist Alexander Prokhanov, all rallied in the crusade against Western influence and a plausible democratization of the Russian state. The same rhetoric and groups, arose yet again in the context of the Anti-Maiden movement in Ukraine, laying the foundations of what will become the very influential Izborsky Club and other conservative “patriotic movements” synthesizing heteroclite individuals and ideas in the defense of Russia’s anti-Westernism and illiberalism; being an essential component and an ideological justification<sup>33</sup> for the repression of the internal “enemies”.

It took the shape of censorship for the opposition medias and NGOs but also for the Russian internet. Interestingly, the argument invoked to justify the censorship for these two was not the same:

For the opposition structures, the restrictions came from their belonging to the coalition of “foreign agents” and anti-patriotic groups that the Kremlin saw as a threat to its integrity. This took the shape of the “law on foreign agents”<sup>34</sup> that has been adopted in July 2012 by the state Duma. It passed into law the restriction of the activities of more than fifty NGOs<sup>35</sup>, trade-unions, medias<sup>36</sup> and democratic groups targeting both Russian and Western organizations on

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<sup>33</sup> See Ch. II Section 2.

<sup>34</sup> The Federal law “On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organizations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent” 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Such as Transparency International, the MacArthur Foundation, Memorial and others.

<sup>36</sup> Such as Radio Free Europe, \$ Echo of Moscow, Dozhd Tv Chanel (which has been placed on the list of foreign agents on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 2021) and others.

the basis of the fact they received funds from abroad. It was completed three years later by the so-called law on Undesirable Organizations<sup>37</sup> which allowed prosecutors to declare, without judicial process and of course without possibility of appeal, any organization “undesirable” and thus enforce sanctions on the structure or members. On the one hand, the strengthening of the Kremlin’s grip on independent medias and organizations then came into force with references to sovereignty, on the other hand, the control of internet and social medias – which played a major role in the outcome of the 2011-12 protests was deployed with references to “morality politics” (2014, Sharafutdinova, G.) We can observe that, once again, the couple of sovereignty and morality plays an important role in the narrative of the *élite* to further extend its illiberalism.

In a context characterized by the outcome of the Pussy Riot trial, by vocal Femen activism – whose leading members were all Ukrainians women – these two symptoms of Western and Orangist ‘decay’ nourished the Kremlin’s rhetoric to further censure the internet; arguing an imperious necessity to preserve Russian values, avoid impious contents and suppress atheism and immorality from the Russian web (2017 Engström, M.). The Kremlin relied on both “morality politics” and on the Russian Orthodox Church, which has always been a force of proposition for policies going in that direction. It has, as side-effects, brought to the shutting-down of internet pages, notably some pages owned by independent medias in the name of impious contents. It is noteworthy to draw a parallel with the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church, or of the tsarist Russian Orthodox Church, *vis-à-vis* progressive of democratic forces under autocratic regimes as churches and religious ministries often play a conservative role and favor counter-revolutionary attitudes.

That official support from the Church that blessed the “League for Safe Internet”, questions the relationship that the state apparatus and the political *élites* has built with the very powerful Russian Orthodox Church.

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<sup>37</sup> The Federal law “On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation” 2015.



*Section 2 : Holy Rus', the Russian Orthodox Church and the State.*

"I reduce God to the attribute of nationality?" cried Shatov. "On the contrary, I raise the people to God. And has it ever been otherwise? The people is the body of God. Every people is only a people so long as it has its own god and excludes all other gods on earth irreconcilably; so long as it believes that by its god it will conquer and drive out of the world all other gods. Such, from the beginning of time, has been the belief of all great nations, all, anyway, who have been specially remarkable, all who have been leaders of humanity. (...) If a great people does not believe that the truth is only to be found in itself alone (in itself alone and in it exclusively); if it does not believe that it alone is fit and destined to raise up and save all the rest by its truth, it would at once sink into being ethnographical material, and not a great people. A really great people can never accept a secondary part in the history of Humanity, nor even one of the first, but will have the first part. A nation which loses this belief ceases to be a nation. But there is only one truth, and therefore only a single one out of the nations can have the true God, even though other nations may have great gods of their own. Only one nation is 'god-bearing'<sup>38</sup>, that's the Russian people, and... and... and can you think me such a fool, Stavrogin."

"*Demons*" by Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, 1873  
Translated by Constance Garnett, p. 260-261

It is not a coincidence that in the works of two giants of the Russian literature : Lev Tolstoy<sup>39</sup> and Fyodor Dostoyevsky<sup>40</sup> the notions of sanctity, redemption, Parousia<sup>41</sup> or religiosity are ubiquitous. Those two placed in the center of their late-life works (which are considered their masterpieces) the relation that the Russians have with God, the Self, the State and the Church. If we can class Dostoyevsky among the Slavophile movement, which he defended, the case of Tolstoy is more complex. He was a partisan of a Christian mysticism which rejected the political life and the structures of power seen as the manifestations of evilness and a sum of bodies that were infringing the message carried by Christianity. These two, besides of being great stylists, carried a social and political vision of Russia which are singular and noteworthy.

Dostoyevsky's personages, in three of his most famous novels, are often placed in a situation of moral, existential and ethical decay due to poverty or to the vacuity of their beliefs. *The Karamazov Brothers* (1880) paints the story of a parricide committed by one of the four sons of a pervert, rich and alcoholic buffoon. All of his sons – at the exception of one, which plans to become a monk – represent a facet of the vices which grows in the society and corrupt it.

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<sup>38</sup> « Théophore » in the French or « Teòforo » in Italian editions, suites better since they embody in a finer fashion the historical and religious reference that this term imply. From the Ancient Greek : « θεόφορος », "Theo" God – "phoros" to carry.

<sup>39</sup> Yasnaya Polyana 1828 – 1910 Astapovo.

<sup>40</sup> Moscow 1821-1881 St Petersburg.

<sup>41</sup> It designates the second venue of Jesus Christ on Earth. Which is, after his Ascension, going to come back on Earth.

The only true remaining Christian of these four tries to save them from their deviant aspiration to drunkenness, nihilism and atheism which threatens them and, in the eyes of Dostoyevsky, the Russian society as a whole. The same type of discourses nourishes *Crime and Punishment* (1866) as well as *Demons* (1871). They all paint the growing nihilism in all stratum of a Russian society corrupted by atheism, fake ideas and the ubiquity of gratuitous murder. Nevertheless, they all three end up with the same type of conclusion which is that the observance of Orthodoxy, the grammar of Christian love and the following of the Church are the only ways in which the Russian people, and humanity could be spared the fate of such a moral panic. The same type of mystical and salutary epiphany touches the heroes of these three novels, and changes their attitude. Dostoyevsky, aside his writings, was also a chronicler and a person politically engaged in the intellectual life of his times. In his late life<sup>42</sup>, he criticized the moral decay of the society and the influence of Western ideas, themselves inherited from the Roman Catholic Church's corruption, that was causing all these wounds to the holy Russian land. The idea of religious epiphany and of metaphysical liberation of the Russian people by Orthodoxy must also be read in the light of his commitment to the Slavophile movement that equally carried a messianic message.

Tolstoy, despite developing a different style and approach of the Russian society somehow ended in the same direction than Dostoyevsky did. At first, in *War and Peace* (1869) Tolstoy splendidly depicts the Napoleonic era from the eyes of a series of personages of the Russian aristocracy. The plot culminates with the invasion of Russia by the *Grande Armée*, its fall because of the Russian's pugnacity and the lack of anticipation of the winter's harshness. Aside of this development, Tolstoy paints the formation in this context of a national sentiment among the *élites* and a return in force of the Orthodoxy among them. Several of Tolstoy's personages, such as Pierre Bezukhov, Maria Bolkonskaya and Prince Andrei Bolkonsky all met at a certain moment of the book a religious revelation and an understanding of Russia's genius which lays in its Orthodox characteristic. The plot also shows, in a much more tempered way than in Dostoyevsky's works, the conflict that opposes an irreligious West and the Orthodox Eastern lands. *War and Peace*'s end develops at length the idea of the Russian Empire and its unique faith as being the Restrainers of civilization against a Napoleon being painted out as an Antichristic figure<sup>43</sup>. Religiosity and mysticism are also treated in Tolstoy's last novel

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<sup>42</sup> He has been a Socialist during his youth, he ended deported in Siberia. He was granted pardon by the Tsar and then became a zealous defender of the Imperial regime, of Orthodoxy and of the Slavophile idea.

<sup>43</sup> See Ch. IV.

*Resurrection* (1899), that paints the revelation of Prince Nekhlyudov's faith in the course of his following of a prostitute condemned to deportation in Siberia on the allegation of her guilt in a man's assassination. However, Tolstoy in this novel harshly criticizes the Orthodox Church, its corruption and its illegitimate collaboration with a State that commits crimes and betrays the divine message. The virulence of this novel's charge against the Church has been so strong that the book was considerably censored and Tolstoy had been excommunicated from the Church.

The example of these two preeminent authors shows the place that Orthodoxy and messianism occupies in their respective works. This literary detour shows us very well that this subject was worth treating in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to fully understand Russia's logics of power and singularity. I will try to show that the Church nowadays still plays an important role in shaping the society.

#### Subsection 2.a : The Russian Orthodox Church as an Ally in the 'Cultural Turn'.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly formed Russian Federation in quest of national unity has tried, via its *élites* to regenerate the status of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The Church, and the repression which it endured was seen as a symbol of the excesses of the Soviet regime. Secularization was of course one of the main ideas of the 1917's revolutionaries. Persecutions and instrumentalization of the Church went one from the revolution to the *Perestroika*. Of course, with different degrees of intensity in different contexts, but this is not our matter. It is today the religion which has the more believers in the Federation with 73% of Russians declaring themselves Orthodox according to a study of the statistic institute VTsIOM led in 2010. By constitutional provision, the Russian regime is a secular one as stated in its Constitution<sup>44</sup>. We observe, however, that the Church is a very influential body, which tries to influence the course of the public affairs.

The ROC has played, historically a very important role in the construction of Russian culture and in the affirmation of the Russian identities and statehood. It is often considered to be the "state-shaping religion / *gosudarstvo-obrazuiushchaia tserkov*" (2016, Engström, M.) of

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<sup>44</sup> Article 14 : "1. The Russian Federation is a secular state. No religion may be established as a state or obligatory one. 2. Religious associations shall be separated from the State and shall be equal before the law." Requests were addressed to amend this and include the Orthodoxy as a national matrix in 2013.

Russia, similarly to what can be said in Western Europe with regards to the middle-age realms and Catholicism. Its real influence in today’s Russian however, is much more disputable since, contrarily to what used to take place before 1917, solely 2 to 4% of the population goes to Church on a regular basis.

The following tables, will, however provide a clearer mapping (Source: Levada Center, 2020):

| <b>VIEWS ON RELIGION</b>                                       |         |         |         |         |         |                |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------------|
| WHAT ROLE DOES RELIGION PLAY IN YOUR LIFE? <i>(one answer)</i> |         |         |         |         |         |                |
|  | Oct. 05 | Sep. 07 | Jan. 12 | Mar. 13 | Feb. 16 | <b>Feb. 20</b> |
| A very important one   | 11      | 6       | 6       | 5       | 6       | <b>12</b>      |
| A fairly important one   | 27      | 26      | 24      | 29      | 28      | <b>28</b>      |
| Not a very important one                                       | 39      | 41      | 45      | 43      | 40      | <b>35</b>      |
| No role at all   | 20      | 24      | 20      | 19      | 22      | <b>24</b>      |
| It is difficult to say   | 2       | 3       | 5       | 4       | 4       | <b>2</b>       |

| DO YOU BELIEVE THE CHURCH SHOULD INFLUENCE GOVERNMENT DECISION-MAKING? <i>(one answer)</i> |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |                |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------------|
|  | Oct. 05 | Oct. 07 | Jan. 12 | Mar. 13 | Feb. 16 | Jun. 17 | Dec. 18 | <b>Jan. 20</b> |
| Definitely yes   | 16      | 7       | 6       | 5       | 6       | 6       | 8       | <b>9</b>       |
| Probably yes   | 26      | 22      | 20      | 21      | 18      | 22      | 16      | <b>18</b>      |
| Probably not   | 27      | 33      | 37      | 39      | 38      | 36      | 31      | <b>28</b>      |
| Definitely not   | 24      | 28      | 28      | 26      | 28      | 22      | 41      | <b>40</b>      |
| It is difficult to say   | 8       | 10      | 10      | 10      | 9       | 14      | 6       | <b>5</b>       |

WHICH OF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BEST REFLECTS YOUR BELIEF IN THE EXISTENCE OF GOD?  
*(respondents were presented with a card with a list of answers from which they could choose only one or write in their own)*

|   | May<br>91 | Sep.<br>98 | Jan.<br>08 | Feb.<br>09 | Aug.<br>14 | Dec.<br>15 | Oct.<br>17 | Dec.<br>18 | Jan.<br>20 |
|---|-----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| I don't believe in the existence of God   | 18        | 19         | 10         | 6          | 7          | 8          | 10         | 8          | 9          |
| I don't know whether or not God exists and doubt that it is possible to have proof of his existence                                     | 18        | 11         | 9          | 8          | 10         | 10         | 9          | 7          | 9          |
| I don't believe in God, but I believe in a higher power   | 18        | 13         | 11         | 11         | 14         | 16         | 11         | 12         | 14         |
| I sometimes believe in the existence of God and sometimes don't   | 11        | 12         | 14         | 13         | 15         | 15         | 13         | 13         | 11         |
| I believe in the existence of God, though I sometimes have doubts   | 15        | 16         | 21         | 21         | 19         | 17         | 19         | 17         | 17         |
| I know that God exists and do not have any doubts   | 14        | 24         | 32         | 36         | 29         | 25         | 31         | 38         | 35         |
| Other (" <i>He exists within us," "believe in miracles," "I believe in the existence of a higher power that governs the universe"</i> ) | 1         | -          | <1         | <1         | <1         | <1         | <1         | 1          | 1          |
| It is difficult to say  | 5         | 6          | 4          | 5          | 7          | 9          | 7          | 5          | 4          |

These tables, extracted from a survey led by the Levada Center in 2020, shows a synthetic mapping of the current trends on religions within the Russian society, they notably highlight deep-rooted trends on the last table: notably the turn of the majority of Russians from irreligiosity/atheism in 1991 to religiosity in 2020: a very singular dynamic among the European continent. However, atheism, which was part of the official ideology of the USSR had also led its mark in the Russian society since circa 9% of Russians declared themselves as such in 2020 and another 9% expresses a somehow critical agnostic view.

The ROC, already in the nineties criticized the harmful effects of Western style liberalism and the political governance based on human rights. The Patriarch of Moscow Kirill, the highest authority of the Orthodox Church, said on this matter: “the fundamental contradiction of our epoch (...) is the opposition of liberal civilized standards on the one hand, and the values of national, cultural and religious identity on the other” (2016, Anderson, J.). This gives the tone of the relation that the Church has towards democratic standards. The claim is that democratic standards are inherited of the vast secularization, or rather of the “disenchantment” to quote Max Weber, that followed the Enlightenment. The large place given to the self-affirmation of persons is considered by the zealots of Orthodoxy as opposed to both the flourishing of faith and fair consideration of good and evil since it relies not anymore on the dogmas but on a personal appreciation of facts. Always in the same fashion, Vsevolod Chaplin, former chairman of the Synodal Department for the Cooperation of Church and Society of the ROC, and the second most recognized authority of the Church according to opinion polls, said in an equivocal publication that the democratic system was a sinful one which “rejects religious authority and declares the government independent from God (...) it is rooted in competition (...) The Church’s ideal is the nation as a living organism, a unified body that sees disagreements as unnatural and unhealthy” (2016, Anderson, J.). Such discourses are reminiscent of the *Syllabus of Errors*, which Pope Pius IX published in the 1864 which condemned democratism, liberalism and rationalism as heresies.

The 2011-12 protests were, as we mentioned in the precedent subsection, the occasion for the Kremlin to strengthen its grip over the civil society and impose its famous “cultural turn”. This traditionalist turn of the *élites* was welcomed with enthusiasm by a significant share of the ROC which saw in this move an opportunity to gain in influence. It seems that this new orientation was a win-win option for both the clergy and the state power since it allowed the two of them to rely one on another and to justify the choices that they were adopting by the necessity to allow the empowerment of the other (2016, Engström, M.). Elements of public discourses such ‘religious values’, ‘sanctity’ and ‘protection of the faith’ were used to unleash the conservative and repressive policies towards LGBTs, radical activists and parts of the intelligentsia. For instance, the ‘punk prayer’ of the Pussy Riots within Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior shed light on this repression since the media campaign, as well as the

harshness of the law enforcement procedure, showed a reliance on “morality politics” by both the ROC and the State on their moral and judicial condemnation (2014, Sharafutdinova, G.).

In this context of “morality politics” the return of Orthodoxy as a political force has been presented by the Russian authorities as a “natural” move which followed the ideological and ethical vacuum that succeeded to the fall of the USSR. Putin himself stated that “This was a natural revival process for the Russian people. They did this spontaneously, without prodding from outside, from the authorities or from the church. The church was hardly in a state to be able to prod anyone at that time. It was in a lamentable state. On the material side, the Soviet authorities had robbed it probably more thoroughly than they robbed anyone, but on the organizational and spiritual side it was also in a very serious situation. It was a spontaneous movement from the people themselves to turn back to their roots.” (2013, Putin V.)

This argument of the leader of Russian Federation do not consider the campaigns of re-Christianization which took place in the nineties and still perpetuates itself. Of course, there has been an involvement of the Russian state in regenerating the Orthodox faith and legacy of Russia. Aside of the “moral” support and the political alignment of these two, we can witness the reconstruction of churches across the country, the Law of restitution of the Church’s goods in 2010, is an example.

That cooperation is effectively very fruitful since the Church, via its representatives, supports also individual members of the political *élites*. For instance, Kirill, the former Metropolitan of Moscow – now Patriarch of the ROC – participated to the electoral campaign of Putin in 2000 and called his victory a ‘gift from the sky’ (2004, Moniak-Azzopardi, A.). Always in the same fashion, some members of the ROC developed excellent relations with oligarchs, close to the power, which are zealous promoters of traditional values. The case of Konstantin Malofeev<sup>45</sup>, whose actions and commitment have been praised by Metropolitan Tikhon<sup>46</sup>, stressed by Marlène Laruelle (2020, Laruelle M.) shows very well the willingness of the Church to expand its influence. Malofeev is a magnate of financial investments and the owner of the media group

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<sup>45</sup> A Russian oligarch, close to Putin and Orthodox hard-liner which expresses monarchist convictions, a willingness towards an even harsher conservatism and a stronger influence of Orthodoxy on politics.

<sup>46</sup> A very influential member of the Orthodox clergy which is Metropolitan of Pskov but also the authors of best-sellers books on Orthodoxy and History. He is also supposed to be Putin’s personal confessor.

Tsargrad<sup>47</sup>. Via his media group, he gives a forum to the most conservative thinkers in Russia, supports euro-skepticism parties in the EU and pushes for a political agenda closer to the Church. Malofeev also finances the Church or and its initiatives, notably the League for the Safe internet that I mentioned earlier in this essay.

Meanwhile, the ROC remained remarkably silent on the violation of human rights in Russia or to the conflict in Ukraine. Thus, separation of State and Church appears, with regards to what we just said, very porous. If a majority of Russians (40% strongly opposed and 28% somehow opposed) expressed their disapproval of an influence of the Church in politics (2020, Levada Center) we can clearly note that their voices are not considered. The symbiotic *entente* between the Church and the Putinist state also deploys itself within the framework of identity politics. Effectively, as we will see in the following subsection, the ROC, via the voice of its representatives is a zealous defender of the spiritual and civilization distinctiveness of Russians via-à-vis its Western counterparts.

#### Subsection 2.b : The “Orthodox Civilization”.

We have seen in the previous subsection that conservatism is very vivid among the Orthodox clergy. Its most prominent figures expressively supported the cultural turn engaged by the Kremlin in the aftermath of the Bolotnaya protests since they certainly found an interest in an official promotion of traditionalist values. Those being at the core of the Church’s message, it is somehow understandable. The progressive abandonment of the “modernization-adaptation” framework was also welcomed with enthusiasm given the fact that the religious authorities viewed with caution the secular and democratic evolution of Western societies. However, a different and, if I may, unorthodox, stance flourished among the *élites* of the Russian clergy with the assertion of Russia’s civilizational distinctiveness.

Effectively, the essence of the civilization that Russia claims to belong to, is mostly a religious one. If Orthodoxy is not the exclusive matrix of the Russian civilization, it certainly constitutes its most vivid element of distinction. I would like, before fully developing this subject, to proceed to a brief contextualization by recalling four key points related to the genealogy of this civilization :

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<sup>47</sup> The name of the group echoes the name that ancient Slavs and Slavophiles use to give to Constantinople. It is a qualifier which carries a lot of symbolic meanings.



- 1) The most important step is often associated with the baptism of the King of the Kievan Rus' Vladimir the First in 998.
- 2) The separation of the Roman and Byzantine church's in 1054 constitutes a milestone in the relation between Catholics and Orthodox.
- 3) With the fall of Konstantinopolis in 1453 which was, following the fall of the Roman Empire considered to be a "New Rome", the core of the Orthodox world moved towards Eastern Europe and Moscow claimed to be the "Third Rome". This time-lapse also coincides with the assumption to sovereign power of the Christian princes of the Rus' and to the defeat of the Mongol Khan.
- 4) The historical expansion of the Russian Empire, it's *imperium* over most of the Orthodox subjects and its status of protector of those makes it even further the heir of the Byzantine civilization.

These historical sequences and the political concepts that derive from it, are asserted by the Orthodox clergy as the source of a duty that Russia – or rather the Holy Rus'<sup>48</sup> – has of being the central point of the Orthodox world and protecting it from its enemies.



*In Rus', The Soul of the People* (1916) by Mikhail Nesterov

We can see that the painting of Nesterov displays all stereotypes encompassed on the Russian people and culture : the people, the clergy, the Cossacks, the aristocracy, the holy icons and a typical landscape with its onion dome's church in the back<sup>49</sup>. Nesterov was himself very

<sup>48</sup> *Svyatáya Rus'* in Russian.

<sup>49</sup> We can also recognize Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. On the very right of the canvas, Tolstoy is dressed in sky-blue and Dostoyevsky, at his left, is depicted half-bald and with a ginger beard.

inclined towards Orthodoxy and Russian messianism. A wide number of his canvas, and their depiction of such scenes testify this inclination. The use of such a piece may sound odd to the jury, I acknowledge that it is unconventional but I have thought that it could allow us to grasp in an original, sensitive way, the social projection of the notion of Holy Rus' among Russians.

The concept of Holy Rus' originates from the popular culture of Russian and Slavic peoples, it was originally crafted by an Orthodox monk called Maksim the Greek officiating in Moscow during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It used to echo to a series of vivid folkloric sentiments amid Russians as metaphor of the Holy Kingdom (2014, Suslov, M. D.). It encompasses a territory which overcomes the borders of today's Russian Federation by notably including Ukraine or Belarus which definitely belong to this imaginary land. I do not intend to further develop this geo-political and geographic aspects since it is the topic of the next chapter<sup>50</sup>. However, the political aspects of Holy Rus' perfectly fit into this subsection's topic.

Many members of the Orthodox clergy nowadays consider the concept of Holy Rus' to be, in the words of Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow *and all Rus'*, the “cultural and spiritual core of the Russian nation” or it's “backbone” (2014, Suslov, M. D.). Given what we stated in the previous subsection, it is not a surprise that this concept of Holy Rus' meets a revival in the context of affirmation of the geopolitics of the Russian Federation. These two political bodies having a common interest in controlling, or at least feeding populations with narratives that goes in their own interests, since we know from Civilizationist thinkers that the civilization's fate is to fight each other, especially at their borders.

Thus, there is no coincidence that the zealots of Civilizationism tend to consider Ukraine as is western *limes* of the Orthodox civilization rather than as a sovereign state. It is precisely because they view Ukraine as an ideological battlefield between the West and the “Russian” civilizations. They view the sign of a sinful, western influence in the recent evolution of the Ukrainian society. It is notably displayed, by Patriarch Kirill, via the presentation of the colored revolutions (targeting especially Ukraine) as a process of “enslavement” and of a “spiritual colonization” by western ideas (2014, Suslov, M.D.). Such discourses are reminiscent of the anticolonial and anti-imperialist stance developed by the Soviet Union, and more broadly by communists, against Western powers. Vsevolod Chaplin for instance repeatedly stated that the

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<sup>50</sup> See Ch. III.

“Orthodox civilization stands in opposition to western democracy, whose downfall is not far off” and added that “The very existence of a pluralistic democracy is none other than a direct result of sin” (2016, Anderson, J.). Similar assertions are to be found in the works of Tikhon, Metropolitan of Pskov, whose case is worth studying since he frequently relied on Civilizationism, most notably in his best-seller book which draws a comparison between today’s Russia and the fall Byzantine empire. He accuses the Byzantine’s *élite* of corruption and of “Latinization” of their values and behavior, setting some evident parallels between the two epochs.

These narratives sustain the policy concepts crafted by the Kremlin and the resistance to what both the Church and the Russian Federation view as the Trojan horse of Westernism. Both of them defending a right to singularity, self-sufficiency and moral sovereignty within a multipolar international order. Similarly, the narrative about the ‘deviancy’ of the Western-secularist model is very present among the ROC. Criticisms on political liberalism, growing atheism, withdrawal of religion from the public decision making or tolerance *vis-à-vis* LGBTs are considered self-evident proofs of the decay of western Christianity with regards to the vivacity of the Orthodox faith. The ROC then sees itself as the “bulwark” of the Orthodox civilization with regards to the spread of a rampant Western *anomia* (2014, Suslov M.D.). This notion of the Russian civilization as a “bulwark” of humanity, which relies on the biblical concept of *Katechon*, will be developed in the last subsection of this essay<sup>51</sup>. It represents, I believe, the core of this essay.

This kind of discourses is often displayed within the Orthodox community and clergy, which, due to its reliance on religious messianism is somehow unsurprising. We can note that a broader share of the Russian intelligentsia has adopted this political stance.

### *Section 3 : Mutations of the Russian Intelligentsiya.*

“Once liberalism has been excluded, the kaleidoscope is broad and plural.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See Ch. IV.

<sup>52</sup> (2020, Laruelle, M.)

I voluntarily refer to the Russian term *intelligentsiya*, instead of cultural *élites* or intellectuals as it allows us to understand the very characteristic relationship that the members of this social group have with the political power within the Russian context. It echoes to 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophical conceptions which view the intellectual *élites* as forming a social stratum within the Russian empire.

It was originally composed of Russian aristocrats but the end of serfdom in the Empire opened it to commoners. It rapidly became dominated by an urban *bourgeoisie* which shared the same characteristics than one of Western Europe countries. That stratum was somehow an in-between one. It was not belonging to nobility, yet it had a similar degree of education and sometimes an equal, or more important, financial capacity. They were not, obviously, titular or the same heired rights and prestige than the nobility. However, they were in any case comparable to the mass of former serfs which arose as a social class from their emancipation in 1861. The idea of catching-up European standards in terms of intellectual development and educational levels was one of this group's objective. The *intelligentsiya* as a social group in charge of producing cultural and intellectual knowledge evolved in the context of growth of the Communist and Socialist ideas in the country. The term became a synonym of not only intellectual activity but also of an intellectual activity with clear political aims. In other terms, the *intelligentsiya* must be seen as a group which promotes metapolitics in the frame of culture, literature, public commitment etc. That view of the *intelligentsiya* was also the one shared during the Soviet period, with propagandist purposes. I will try to show that, in the context of the cultural turn, a re-mobilization of this concept occurred to enhance the cultural and social aims of the Putinist state.

Contrarily to a common belief in the West, the Russian state allows the expression of pluralistic views within the sphere of political debates. We have shown that a wide range of Monarchist, Theocratists, Eurasianists, National-Bolsheviks or Soviet-nostalgic figures are well-installed in the Russian mediatic ecosystem from whom only liberals are pushed-out<sup>53</sup>. It also worth noting that despite the diversity of these different groups, they all share a set of essential characteristics: anti-liberalism, anti-Westernism and an emphasis placed on distinctiveness. This looks a lot like a deliberate attempt from the Kremlin to narrow the spaces of free-speech to the ones which are sympathetic to its world views, or at least to those who do not express criticism which might jeopardize the legitimacy of the Kremlin.

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<sup>53</sup> See Ch. II Sec. 1.

We can recall the extent to which Civilizationism has become a vital point in the academia and in the formation of the *élites*. An analysis of this precise matter has been led through the analysis of PhD dissertation the Duma members obtained (2020, Suslov M.D., Kotkyna I.). Aside of some funny inputs<sup>54</sup>, the article shows that, in the words of the authors: “ Civilization is the concept that links the academia to the political élite (...) [since the] civilizational rhetoric [is] a constitutive part of the crystallizing conservative ideology.” An increasing number of prominent figures<sup>55</sup> of the Russian state have passed by this kind of curriculum and oriented their dissertations on the topic of Civilizationism or “Culturology”<sup>56</sup>. It is certainly made by the authors in order to assure their fidelity to the mainstream political stance of Russian politics and to show willingness to defend it since it mainly relies on discourses sympathetic to the Kremlin’s policies. Suslov and Kotkyna also point out the fact, which is not devoided of irony, that the teachers focusing on “culturology” were, for many of them, those in charge of teaching the Marxist-Leninist doctrine until 1991.

TABLE 3  
MOST IMPORTANT RUSSIAN THINKERS AS VIEWED BY IR SCHOLARS IN RUSSIA

| <i>Russian thinkers</i> | <i>Assessment</i> |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| N. Danilevskii          | 35%               |
| C. Leontyev             | 18%               |
| A. Panarin              | 15%               |
| V. Vernadsky            | 10%               |
| N. Gumilev              | 10%               |
| N. Berdyayev            | 10%               |
| V. Solovyev             | 8%                |
| N. Trubetskoi           | 8%                |
| A. Gertsen              | 5%                |
| N. Savitsky             | 5%                |
| P. Sorokin              | 5%                |
| V. Lenin                | 5%                |
| S. Witte                | 5%                |

*Source: Tsygankov and Tsygankov (2014, p. 104).*

The growth of the Civilizationist rhetoric among the academia is also an element which legitimizes the Kremlin’s discourses since it gives a scientific asset. We can see from the previous table (2017, Tsygankov, A. P.) that the penetration of Civilizationist thinkers is *en vogue* among the academia, and especially among IR scholars since the first and the second above-mentioned thinkers are two prominent figures that we already mentioned in this essay.

<sup>54</sup> The article also shed an amusing light on the fact that the political personal of the Russian Federation have a very high rate of PhD-owners among its members, with number incomparable to those of other Western states. However, many of them relied massively on plagiarism or other fraudulent means to obtain them.

<sup>55</sup> For instance Dmitrii Rogozin (NATO Ambassador, Roskosmos), Vladimir Medinskii (Minister of Culture) or Vladimir Lepekhin (State Duma deputy, political adviser).

<sup>56</sup> An academic discipline which emerged from the fall of the Soviet Union.

Among the new noteworthy items of the Russian conservative *intelligentsiya*, we can mention the popping-up of a new and somewhat hybrid platform: the Izborsky Club. Before fully going into the core of this very special organization, I would like to make brief a historical detour on the genealogy of this Club so that the lector understands better its foundations and its utterly bizarre nature.

The genealogy of the Izborsky Club is closely linked to the Iuzhinskii Circle, which was an active and informal platform for dissident from the de-Stalinization<sup>57</sup> onwards. I relied, in this paragraph on an article of Marlène Laruelle (2015) which deeply treats this issue. It was a very special structure accessible to a small number of privileged and dissident intellectuals, in violation of the Soviet censorship, where they would access to a wide range of textbooks, doctrines that the regime was hiding from the population. During the sixties the Iuzhinskii Circle was a platform designed to grant to the dissident possibilities of escaping the Soviet normality, through literature, mystical or sexual experiments. A significant share of these experiments also relied on the practices of esoteric rituals inherited from the Fascist and the Nazi esoteric traditions but also on “mystical” poets and philosophers in an attempt to embrace a canonical vision of a common a universal tradition<sup>58</sup>. The circle remained active through these decades. In the very beginning of the nineties, it started to be occupied by a certain Aleksander Dugin. During a decade, thanks to his relations within the nationalist movements and to his “long-standing relations” with Aleksander Prokhanov<sup>59</sup>, he published some articles in the press organs of Russian conservatives. The period of the nineties and the platform of far-right clubs and circles have been an “incubator” to all these now famous figures of the Russian *intelligentsiya*. Despite their differences of opinions, they mixed-up and evolved in the same environment. Personages such as Eduard Limonov, Maksim Kalashnikov, Aleksander Prokhanov or Aleksander Dugin for instance, whose influence on the *élites* and on the political scene is important, frequented each other during those times among the Iuzhinskii Circle. This Circle, however, melted itself in the more influential and “better-connected” Izborsky Club in 2012 (2015, Laruelle M.).

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<sup>57</sup> Through the which were liberated millions of political prisoners and/or dissidents.

<sup>58</sup> The article notably relates readings of poets such as Rimbaud, Rilke and German philosophers such as Nietzsche or Heidegger (2015, Laruelle M.).

<sup>59</sup> A Stalinian, fiercely anti-Western authors, which is now President of the Izborsky Club.

The Izborsky Club was founded in September 2012 in the town of Izborsk<sup>60</sup> by Aleksander Prokhanov to promote conservative and statist worldviews within the Russian political *élites*. It is mostly constituted of publicists, thinkers, members of the academia and high-ranking figures of civil service Russia's. The declaration of Ulyanovsk<sup>61</sup>, published in 2013 is, in the words of the Club, “the base of their association” to sort out the Russian civilization from its wrong path:

- First, opposing to the ideology of globalized liberalism an “imperial and patriotic front”.
- Second, being a platform for the merging of the “reds” and “white” sides of the Russian patriots on the basis of a Statist program laying on Orthodoxy and Social Justice.
- Third, reconciling these two factions on historiographic bases by the creation of a “new ideology” based on a reconciliation of the two factions under the aegis of the sanctified notions of sovereignty and anti-liberalism that both shares.
- Fourth, tackling Russia's backwardness, demographic problems and social problems in order to be able to win the “future confrontation”.
- Fifth, the merging of these two ideologies are designed to meet support from the Russians but also for the “majority of the populations of post-Soviet states”.

The Club is also inherited from the decade of the going from 2000 to 2012. We have seen before that this timeline was characterized by an attempt made by the Kremlin's official to bring back Russia to its status of “Great Power” and to adapt the country to the standards of Western globalization. We also mentioned that this decade was, in many ways, fed with concept from Vladislav Surkov. Notions of “sovereign democracy”, “modernization” and “other Europe” flourished during this time-lapse. These were crystallizing points that the Club's members harshly oppose during the Surkov's era (2016, Laruelle, M.). In this respect, the Club's founders said that they were impeached by this latter to organize themselves freely and that only after his departure from the center of the scene (in 2012) the Club was able to be operational.

It emphasizes the need to make national initiatives and large-scale projects, notably via what they call the “great leap forward<sup>62</sup>” which is a direct translation of the initiative that Mao took for China. Its main objective, however still lays in the affirmation of the Russian state as an

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<sup>60</sup> Near the Estonian border, in the Oblast of Pskov. Which is considered to be the place where the oldest traces of the Russian civilization were found.

<sup>61</sup> Link in the bibliography.

<sup>62</sup> “*bol'shoi ryvok*” in Russian.

illiberal Empire – that would be able to satisfy both the Reds and the Whites – and in a “Gramsci-inspired strategies of this conservative avant-garde” to influence the public debates and policies within Russia (2016, Laruelle, M.). Marlène Laruelle argued that the attempts of this Club to influence the political scene were still minimalist, assessing that the Kremlin’s officials were making an opportunistic use of the Club’s inputs and of the celebrity of its members without seriously considering to adopt its propositions.

However, if the ideological ‘purity’ of the Club’s members is not implemented by the Putinist state, we can see that it makes an interesting use of its concepts, notably in terms of geo-politics for what regards Russia’s sphere of influence. The next chapter will try to highlight the importance of geography for Russian history, politics and its influence in the metapolitical order.

### **Chapter III : Frontiers, Identities and Political Power in the ‘Near Abroad’.**

A common assertion is often assessed by the Russian *élites* regarding the regional political geography of Russia. It claims that historically, contrarily to Western powers, the Russian Empire – and then the Soviet one – was not restricted to the result of a geographic expansion and of an *imperium* over these territories because of a different management of these territories than the one taking place in Europe. Effectively, contrarily to Western powers, the political model that Moscow’s rulers developed throughout the centuries was not comparable to the one that took place in the very antagonist, narrowed and nationalized context of Western Europe<sup>63</sup>. It consisted in an incorporation of peoples, sovereign entities or ethnic groups and of political *élites* which kept a share of local autonomy under the aegis of the Russian Empire and, later, under the strict control of the USSR<sup>64</sup>. This question, which is reminiscent of the so-called “politics of nationality” is very interesting and participated to shape identities and power relations in the Empire. This is, however, not the core of our discussion and I do not intend to go further on this matter.

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<sup>63</sup> In which the positive sovereignty over a territory which was formerly disputed would lead to a process of nationalization by the ruling power. e.g. in Alsace-Moselle between the French Republic and the German Empire.

<sup>64</sup> Josef Stalin was in charge of these question as commissar for nationalities and proceeded to a “federative reorganization of the federated peoples” based on linguistic identity and on political loyalty to the Party.



The concept of “nation” being a Western European one, inherited from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Russians have claimed that such an understanding was not transferable in the Eurasian context. This can be viewed as a propaganda tool used by the Kremlin’s officials to deny of their sovereignty those placed under the Russian or Sovietic one. We will see that the persistence of this idea within the Russian political *élites* justifies a very different approach vis-à-vis the former territories of the Empire<sup>65</sup>, characterized by a very vivid post-imperial *ethos* and *praxis*.

The first section of this chapter will to shed a light on the phenomenon of “post-imperial politics”. The second will provide an analysis of a spatial utopias mobilized by the Kremlin and the intelligentsiya in order to foster the relationship that unites the Russians people to the geography of Eurasia. This inversion of the frame of this essay is made to provide a sufficient understanding of regional issues without having to pass by an introductory statement.

*Section 1 : Turmoil in the ‘Near-Abroad’ and the Pursuit of its Geopolitical Mastery.*

#### Subsection 1.a : The Near-Abroad as a Failed Russian Empire.

As it is recalled by Mikhail Suslov: “unlike the Western powers Russia did not *have* an empire—it *was* an empire; therefore, Russia perceives loss of empire as loss of itself” (2014, Suslov M.D.). effectively, the Russian empire used to deploy itself indistinctively upon large surfaces which were not ruled by nation-states until the birth of the Soviet Union. These lands had themselves been conquered at the expense of other non-national Empires – the Persian and Ottoman ones – whose political identities differ from the ones crafted in the Western World. This ‘tension’ between the European and Eastern forms of sovereignty is used as an argument to justify its political behavior *vis-à-vis* the Central Asian and the Caucasus states of the former Soviet Union. Russian asserted that the maintenance of security in the region or that the prevention of threats was a viable motif to deploy aggressive policies.

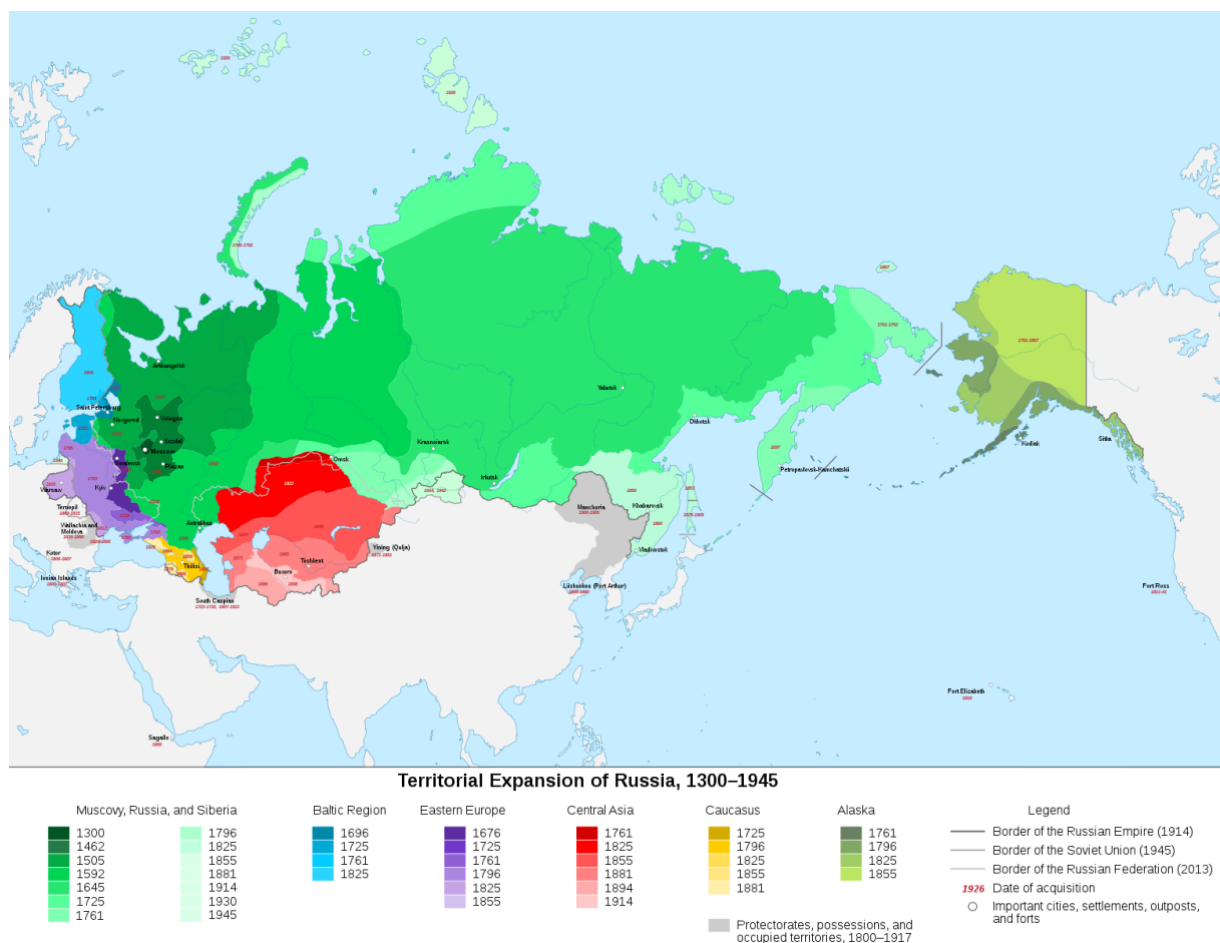
With a certain degree of levity, we could say that this echoes the concept of ‘limited sovereignty’ which Brezhnev and his administration developed with relation to the Eastern European Soviet Republics. This concept, which was a response to the uprisings which took

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<sup>65</sup> The term Empire is the one used by some members of the Izborsky Club to qualify the former sovereignty of the Russian-Soviet states, the Kremlin does not.

place in Hungary and Poland, stated that the Eastern European Republics should be granted a form of autonomy in their self-determination. However, they were not allowed to deviate from the objective of reaching communism, which was the aim of the USSR. Again, with levity, we could say that exists the same kind of relationship this ‘near-abroad’ to the Russian Federation. The former Republics of the Soviet Union which remained under Russian influence still heavily rely on Russia in terms of foreign policy, economic relations but also in the path of their development. There is a presupposed relation of loyalty which recalls a one of subjection or of the one of vassals.

The following map<sup>66</sup> provides a better understanding of the geography the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union used to possess. To the exception of Alaska, of Eastern European and Baltic states which entered the European Union, Russia still exercises a very strong influence in these states, notably in the Caucasus and in Central Asia.



<sup>66</sup> Which is open-access, anonymous but whose data are perfectly accurate.

We already mentioned in this essay that the loss of this “empire” was considered by the Russian President to be the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”, obviously, at the expense of Russia. It is interesting to note that this narrative of a loss, a failure etc. is produced along the one of the unfairness, treachery of the West and of the liberals. The revival of Cold War antagonism and vocabulary is ubiquitous when dealing with geography and political spaces since Russia considers that several “lands” have been stolen from its sovereignty.

Effectively, these lands are considered to be part of the so-called “Russian world”<sup>67</sup>. A concept which has grown in popularity and whose significance is quite clear. The concept of Russian world starts with the assumption that Russia does not fully exploits its potentialities in terms of language, demography (by the mean, notably, of its diaspora: one of the most important in the world) and cultural influence. If Suslov precises that it is an “oversimplification to believe that Russian world has always been a mere synonym for Russia’s neo-imperialist pursuits in the post-Soviet arena” (2018, Suslov, M.D.) it clearly relies, nowadays, on a sum of imaginaries and direct references to the former empires and is not separable from the attempts of the Kremlin to foster its hegemony in its historic zone of influence. A zone in which the Russian language is often spoken as first or second language and in which both the élites and the population sometimes have maintain strong ties with the Russian Federation<sup>68</sup>.

Indeed, if the occurrences to that concept in the nineties were mostly oriented toward the diaspora which had fled the Soviet Union and its cultural legacy, it took from the arrival to power of Putin another dimension, more antagonistic and geopolitical. The understanding of “Russian world” during this period linked, *ispo facto*, the conceptual apparatus that was underlying the ‘cultural turn’ and the anti-Westernist stance that Putin’s politics had taken. It became an ersatz of the broader movement of conservative-civilizationism. It constituted however an original side of this movement due the fact that it was at the core of the regional policy of the Russian Federation since it constituted the sphere of influence of the country.

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<sup>67</sup> “*Russkiy mir*” in Russian.

<sup>68</sup> With the notable exceptions of Ukraine or Georgia where the wars have let a negative perception of Russia among the public opinions and the *élites*.

The notion of “Russian world” has, again, mutated to become a synonym of “*Grossräume*”<sup>69</sup> theorized by Carl Schmitt<sup>70</sup>. This notion designs “grand-space” which is not embodied by the international law but which structures the international relations, as these spaces are, according to the German philosopher, autonomous in their production of normativity. We understand that his notion of normative autonomy is likely to be enjoyed by the zealots of civilizationism in the new conservative avant-garde and, sometimes, in the Kremlin (2018, Suslov, M.D.). Effectively, it echoes very much the civilizationist stance and is reminiscent of the will to make the Russian Federation an autarkic, Eurasianist and irredentist polity.

Effectively, contemporary understanding of the notion of Russian world also includes some irredentist rhetoric as it pictures Russians in some countries as threatened by other countries. The most notable illustration of this phenomenon is certainly contained in the “Medvedev doctrine” with regards to the protection of Russian citizens “wherever they may be”. That argument of Russian that have to be protected from threats was also invoked in the two regional operations that the Federation launched in its ‘near-abroad’ since the collapse of the USSR.

It is of the highest importance to recall that the question of Russians living in the neighboring Republics was not a matter of interest for the *élites* from 1991 to 2008, the conservation of the post-Soviet spatial and political order. During this period, the Federation remained deaf and blind to the separatist’s aspirations of Russian ethnic communities living in Eastern Ukraine, in the Caucasus and in Kazakhstan. The spatial order of the 1991 Belovezha Agreement was then seen as the condition of stability and safety of this very order. However, it is clear and obvious that the post-Soviet spatial had no historical consistency. Despite of this, Russia during this time-lapse defended it as the condition of its tacit political control of the region (2010, Prozorov, S.). We can see that the events in Georgia, and in Ukraine constituted a radical change in this matter.

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<sup>69</sup> “*Großräume*” in German.

<sup>70</sup> Further developments on the influence of Carl Schmitt’s philosophy on Russian politics will be displayed in the next and last chapter (Ch. IV) of this essay.

The invasion of Crimea can be considered a paroxysmal example of the mobilization of the concept of “Russian world”<sup>71</sup> in the aim of foreign policy objectives. It was presented by Russian authorities as a rescue of Russian ethnic peoples which were enduring an unfair treatment by the Ukrainians authorities on “an inseparable part of Russia”. It effectively mobilized all the underlying features of this concept: history, foreign policy objectives and an irredentist and an aggressive attitude towards the “Other”, in this case the pro-Western Ukrainian regime.

The following table (2018, Suslov, M.D.) provides a synthesis of the iterations of this concept and of its evolution towards an irredentist-civilizationist assertion from the *intelligentsiya*:

**Table 1.** Ideological iterations of the “Russian World” concept.

| Chronology                                     | 1996–2001  | 2001–2009  | 2009–2015  |
|--|--|--|--|
| Key intellectuals                              | Petr Shchedrovitskii and “methodologists”                | Gleb Pavlovskii and <i>Russkii Zhurnal</i>             | “new conservatives”, <i>Izborskii Klub</i>             |
| Principal vision                               | Culturally-bounded, de-territorialized network community | Nation-state and its loyal diaspora                    | Isolated, autonomous, expanding state-civilization     |
| Metaphors                                      | Fishing net, hammock, archipelago                        | Octopus with tentacles                                 | Cathedral with many side-chapels                       |
| Intellectual contribution (influence)          | Romantic nationalism                                     | World of worlds, clash of civilizations                | Palingenesis (national regeneration), irredentism      |
| Concomitant ideological concepts               | Theory of “passionarity” (Gumilev), “Russian European”   | Sovereign democracy (Surkov), liberal empire (Chubais) | Holy Russia (Patriarch Kirill), divided nation (Putin) |
| Relation to the “sphere of influence” politics | Reverse logic: Diaspora should influence Russia          | Control (over the post-Soviet sphere)                  | Annexation (of culturally homogenous zones)            |

We can see that this concept of “Russian world” is reminiscent of several geographic narratives that are or have been displayed during Russia’s history<sup>72</sup>. We can also see another illustration of the concept of “imperial nationalism” presented by Emil Pain (2016, Pain, E.).

### Subsection 1.b : Warfare and the Question of Sovereignty.

Russia seems to be engaged in a struggle to increase its sovereignty upon what it considers to be its *nomos*. The use of this term announces my will to introduce, at this stage of the dissertation, some conceptual elements of the thought of Carl Schmitt which I believe to be a central one in the understanding of contemporary Russian politics. The *nomos* is to be

<sup>71</sup> I do not mean that Russia aims at reproducing what it have done in Crimea (and to a lesser extent in the Donbass) in other places since the Crimean Peninsula represents a highly strategic outpost. However the mobilization of the concept of Russian world is highlighting.

<sup>72</sup> See Ch. III Sec. 2.

understood as a link between a soil and its legislative production (2011, Motte, M.). This spatial conception of the *nomos* (or law, to simplify) reflects the importance, for Schmitt of the existence of alternatives *nomos*, which means that a *nomos* cannot be universal as the international law pretends to be (2013, Lievens, M.). This issue will be developed in the next chapter; however, it is important that the reader keeps in mind this idea of *nomos* while reading the development of this subsection.

Clausewitz tells us that “War is nothing but a continuation of politics with the admixture of other means”<sup>73</sup>. It might sound a bit *cliché* but the recalling of this quote allows us to understand the regional policy of the Russian Federation out of the framework which is usually deployed within the Western world. Effectively, Russia has many times shown defiance towards the current development of international politics, which is characterized by a moralization of politics<sup>74</sup>. I will try to show that the Russian Federation has progressively started to refuse the order inherited from the 1991 Belovezha Agreement. Having in mind this quote allows us to understand the Russo-Georgian War and the Crimean annexation in terms of “classical” or Westphalian international relations which denies the categories developed by the international law and by the historical process of the “criminalization of war” which took place in the aftermath of World War One.

The main aim of the liberal approach of international relations, and of the liberal framework of global governance is the avoidance of conflict and usages of strength. That idea comes from the acknowledgment that everyone has an interest in peace and safety. Prozorov goes even further, saying that its liberal-internationalism aims “at the disappearance of the international as such and creation of ‘a self-immanent system without an outside’”, in other words the merger of nations inside of a greater ensemble. If the European Union has managed to craft “a post-modern order where state sovereignty is no longer seen as an absolute” characterized by “the rejection of force for resolving disputes” and “the growing irrelevance of borders” (2015, Auer, S.) the situation is radically different on the other side of the border.

The Kremlin’s commitment to promote, domestically its “nationalization of *élites*”, the struggle against foreign agents and the crushing of the liberal opposition also meets a similar dynamic in the foreign affairs. The criticism of global – we should understand Western – governance,

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<sup>73</sup> *On War*, Carl Von Clausewitz (1832).

<sup>74</sup> Again, this is obviously cynical and opportunistic since Russia also relies on such registers when needed.

consensus-based is then led by Russian authorities in the name of their right to dissidence<sup>75</sup> (2016, Kurylo, B.). This resistance to the international system is very often based upon the means of “hybrid warfare”: manipulation of information, para-military operations which are means against which the international system is often incapable of any initiative. In addition of these means, wars have been an important mean for the Putinist regime to consolidate its legitimacy and its power in the domestic context, notably in the frame of the irregular conflict in Chechnya against radical islamist groups (2017, Kramer, M.). We have clearly seen that, in the context of the Crimean War, sovereignty was not seen by Russia as a static or legalist notion. But rather as a dynamic one, infeedated to the evolution of will of the ‘sovereign’ and somehow reminiscent of the “*Landnahme*” (land appropriation), another Schmittian notion.

I would like to draw a hypothesis on the basis of the article of Sergei Prozorov, which could be a response to his assumption the article of this latter. In his article (2010, Prozorov, S.) he addresses the Russo-Georgian war by analyzing it thanks to the articulation of the concepts of *nomos* (inherited from the post-Soviet space) and of the concept of *ethos*. He argues that the Russian Federation’s in this conflict behaved in a way which constituted a rupture with the historical *Katechonic*<sup>76</sup> attitude of Russia in the region. Even further, he argues that Russia’s intervention was to be understood as the sign of the post-modern and somewhat nihilistic nature of Russian politics which are characterized by “*bespredel* (literally, ‘absence of limits’)”. This nihilism is linked to the fact that Russia was not proposing, in the Russo-Georgian war any radical modification of the post-Soviet *nomos* but rather its strict conservation.

He says, speaking about this conflict and Russia’s attitude:

“More generally, it is difficult even to imagine how such a revisionist claim for a new post-Soviet *nomos* could be articulated by contemporary Russia, given its dearth of symbolic or narrative resources, which has made it extremely difficult to legitimize its policies internationally (...) What contemporary Russia lacks is not merely narrative and symbolic resources that it could draw on in enhancing its reputation, but a more fundamental sense of historical orientation, which conditions the very emergence of *nomos* in a constitutive act of legitimacy” (2010, Prozorov, S.)

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<sup>75</sup> They are of course followed in this path by a sum of international actors such as China or Iran.

<sup>76</sup> *Katechon*, in Ancient Greek : “ὁ κατέχω”, the force which restrains, the Restrainer, something/someone that prevents from the chaos. See Ch. IV.

And he completes in the conclusion of the article:

“Since, as we have argued, the contemporary Russian state carries no historical or developmental project, for which it would deploy sovereign power, this valorization must be understood as the defense of the very boundary that delimits the zone of anomie from its outside and constitutes it as a delimited site of limitlessness a paradoxical formulation that is nonetheless paradigmatic for the state of exception, concretely exemplified by the spatial order of the camp. The camp, inside which every norm is suspended and everything becomes possible, only exists by virtue of a prior delimitation that transforms it into a zone of confinement, marked by a fundamental impossibility of flight.” (2010, Prozorov, S.)

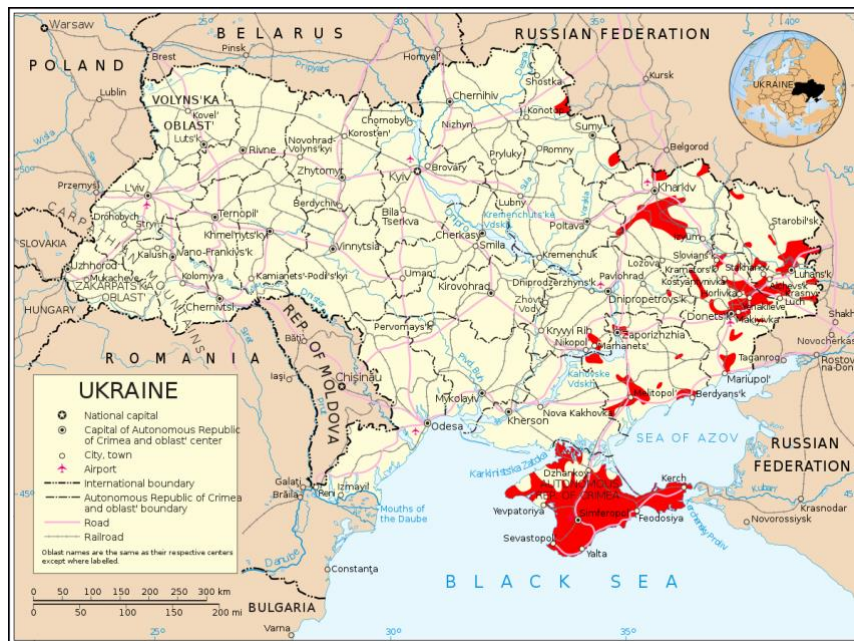
I suggest that we can see by now, that contrarily to what was asserted by Prozorov in 2010 in his article, that Russia did start to carry “historical or developmental project, for which it would deploy sovereign power”. I think that we can affirm that the cultural turn and the reorientations that Russian politics, both domestically and internationally, have taken insofar, allows us to draw confront our assumption to the one developed by Prozorov. If Russia does not rely on a coherent global ideology, it is however engaged in a systemic opposition to the West in the field of metapolitics and also in military conflicts<sup>77</sup>. It is clear that Russia’s continuous reliance on civilizationism as a mean to assert and foster its distinctiveness can be viewed as “historical or developmental project” which is not anymore comparable to what was proposed in the nineties and in the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The study of the Ukrainian conflict offers us further information on what we can consider to be a mutation of Russia’s relationship to the post-Soviet space and the attempts of the Russian Federation in its attempt to create a *nomos* upon the “Russian world”. Let’s first take note of this maps, which shows us the repartition of ethnic Russians in Ukraine, it does not include Russian speakers in the area but only those affiliated to this ethnicity (Source: Soviet census, 1989):

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<sup>77</sup> Even if they are proxy-wars (in Syria) or low-intensity conflicts (in Ukraine).





Indeed, the reliance on a Schmittian vocabulary matches very well to the foreign policy of the Kremlin. Many authors of critical geopolitics saw in his analytical framework a key of understanding of Putin’s behavior in Ukraine: “The takeover of Crimea was surely an excellent example of Schmittian *Landnahme*, imposing order on a territory that was—if only for a while—indeed in flux.” (2015, Auer, S.). We should recall the fact that the annexation was led in the name of a potential danger that Russian speakers were facing in the context of the 2014 presidential election which had taken out from office Yushchenko in the midst of the Second Ukrainian Revolution which itself constituted a replica of the Orange Revolution which took place ten years before. These events constitute a significant geo-political loss for Russia and a pivotal of Ukraine in the bosom of the West. In this context, the annexation of Crimea, on March 2014 significantly modified the regional stability and constituted a milestone in the current path of the Russian state.

The mentions of the plebiscitary “will of the people” in the referendum which met (unsurprisingly) the victory of the Russian option, along with the references of the “natural right” of Russia to occupy this “historical Russian land”, “birthplace of the Rus”” nurtured official discourse to justify this irredentist annexation. If geopolitics are a cold-blooded matter and a struggle of interests, it is very interesting to see that ideology functions as a fuel for the artillery. The fact that Crimean Peninsula constituted a highly strategic outpost in the Black Sea and an entry gate in the Mediterranean Sea is not an argument which can be opposed to this hypothesis. The Crimean affair and the desire of gathering Russian lands/peoples under a

unique *nomos* is also clearly in play in this sequence of events – at least in discourses. In the immediate aftermath of the Crimean annexation, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine starting from April 2014 onwards meets the same will of gathering of ethnic Russian under the Federation’s ideologic umbrella and in opposition to the Euromaidan movement. The support to paramilitary groups, pro-Russian and under-cover Russian soldiers in the Donbass region by the Russian regime is a significant share of this new type of warfare which is nowadays mostly a “hybrid” warfare and a low-to-medium intensity conflict. If this front is still a frozen and static one, the objective of the Russian Federation is undoubtedly to gain sovereignty over the Donbass region. It may sound paradoxically to us but this conflict<sup>78</sup> against a “brother” nation, member of the same civilization is led by Russian officials and displayed as a liberation of the Russians of Ukraine from a “fascist” government.

The following map shows the status of the front on January 2015 (Source: AllWorldWars). The front has not subsequently evolved insofar, and, despite the diplomatic efforts, the situation remains unchanged as the two secessionist Republics are in this in-between ambiguous status.



<sup>78</sup> Which has already caused a total of more than 13 000 casualties.

The developments of the Ukrainian affair, and the ability of the Russian State to engage in regional and global conflicts of different intensity shows us that the Federation is ready to assert its foreign policy objectives by all means, including military ones, in a very Clausewitzian spirit. This also constitutes a major difference with the Western powers which tend to classify Russia among the infamous club of “rogue states”. Nonetheless, the behavior of the Russian Federation can be perceived in a finer way by knowing and anticipating its willingness to “restore” its sovereignty upon the post-Soviet space which is perceived as a space under a constant imminent threat from Russia’s enemies. This “spatial anxiety” (2012, Suslov, M.D.) is to be understood in the light of the immensity of the territory and the evident impossibility of fully defending it. Paradoxically, it highlights the vulnerability of an aggressive and militaristic state which by all means try to preserve its sovereignty and to prevent the West’s influence from entering and evolving in what it considers to be its sanctuary.

The recent crisis which occurred in Caucasus between Azerbaijan and Armenia shows us very well the role played by Russia in these events and the strategic failure of the West in these events. The influential think-tank *Russtrat*, which studies international relations and is ruled by the Elena Panina<sup>79</sup>, produced a note stating that the outcome of Azeri-Armenian war was a master move for the Kremlin since it benefited from this crisis in three ladders (2021, Thom, F.):

- First, Armenia’s Prime Minister Pashinyan has been fiercely punished by the Azeris, he had adopted since his assumption to power a pro-Western stance and did some anti-Russian moves (notably against the Russian secret services deployed in Armenia). Pashinyan and his successors will now understand very well that they have no choice than supporting Russia to ensure their own security.
- Second, the absence of action of the Group of Minsk (Russia, United States, France) and of the Organization of the Security Council of Europe that was in the nineties in charge of the resolution of this old conflict. This represents a withdrawal of the Western powers, of Western modes of resolution of conflicts from the regional scene and an affirmation of Russia as the only peacemaker in this region.
- Third, Russia has successfully done its maneuver in this war. She insists on the fact that Baku (and Istanbul) would not have launched such an offensive without previously

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<sup>79</sup> Which is also President of the Commission on Foreign Affairs of the State Duma.

taking some guarantees from Russia. This shows very well, according to Elena Panina, the mastery which Russia exercises in the region and a return of Russia as the leading force in the Caucasus, and *ipso fact* on former Soviet-space.

Russia's irredentist maneuvers, as well as its very vivid tendency to rely on political metanarratives such as the "Russian world" or "Eurasia" to assert its emprise over the region. In an unequivocal statement, Patriarch Kirill said about the war in Ukraine "Kiev is to us what Jerusalem is to the Christian world": this shows very well the willingness of political and religious *élites* to rely on geographic metanarratives. I will try to show in the following section that these geographic utopias play a symbolic role in the formation and in the assertion of Russia's metapolitics.

## *Section 2 : Spatial Utopias As Political Narratives.*

In this section I will try to show, by listing them and briefly detailing their content three spatial utopias: Holy Rus', Eurasianism and Novorossiia; whose study shed a light on the relationship that fosters metapolitics and *praxis* in today's Russia.

My assumption is that, aside of *realpolitik* a set of values and belief come into play in the relation that the Russian state has with its neighbors and its so-called 'near-abroad' and these values are at the centre of its strategy for regional hegemony. They often display elements of propaganda or ideology, my point is not to assess the veracity or to criticize them, rather, I will try to show that their symbolic charge impacts policies and are used as motives to foster regional policies since they are all three mobilized by the *élites*, at will, on an opportunistic basis to justify certain policies or moves. It is interesting to notice that these narratives all argue of a "naturalness" of Russian interests – some would say imperialism – in the space inherited from the 1991 Belovezha Agreement. The violations of states' sovereignty that we mentioned in the precedent Section thus appear as natural and made on due right. They all are reminiscent of Russia's imperial history and political tradition via a pronounced imperialist stance.

### Subsection 2.a : Holy Rus' and the *translatio imperii*.

We already subsequently detailed the political nature of the Holy Rus' in the previous chapter, though I will be very short on this part, specifying the only the geographical dimension

of this concept. I may sound repetitive, however since it constitutes a matrix of the two following spatial imaginaries (Subsection 2.b and 2.c), I think it is worth mentioning.

The idea of Holy Rus' views the political community which is the heart of the orthodox world as a blessed space. Its geography encompasses "Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Moldova and Kazakhstan" (2012, Suslov, M.D.). It is regularly employed by the Church members and by the zealots of political Orthodoxy as a distinct civilizational space which is, and should further be, a space in which the other civilizations' influence is combatted. The sanctity of Russian cities like Moscow, Smolensk or Novgorod is certain but it shares this status with cities which are not included in the Russian Federation, most notably Kyiv and the Crimean Peninsula which are considered to be the holiest places of the Orthodox world and the cradle of this civilization. If a special care is also oriented towards the "brothers" of the Balkans, they are not part of this geographic ensemble.

The Orthodox faith being at the center of this doctrine, its defenders advocate for a revival of Orthodoxy and to a broader place given to religion in public affairs. Patriarch Kirill himself speaks of a "resurrection" and asserts that Holy Rus' is "not a speculative concept and not just part of our history. It is also our present" (2014, Suslov, M. D.) The ROC leaders frequently picture Holy Rus' as a "bulwark" of "traditional cultures" in the metapolitical opposition to the Western model, this messianic stance is a central feature of this narrative and has instilled vast ranges of political discourses in Russia.

#### Subsection 2.b : Eurasianism and the resistance to the West.

Most of the argument of this short subsection is inspired of the very complete PhD work of Paolo Pizzolo, most precisely chapter 2 and 5 (2019, Pizzolo, P.) which delivers a very broad view of this political movement both in its historical dimension and current developments.

Eurasianist claim that the Eurasian civilization is a body distinct from both the European and the Eastern civilizations, a body characterized by uniqueness and a set of essential features that distinguishes it from these two. It finds its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century's cultural effervescence of political ideas such as Slavophilism. It is strongly influenced by the view of Russia as a distinct cultural ensemble. The Eurasianist movement was born in the twenties and thirties within

*émigrés* circles as a political alternative to Westernism and Communism<sup>80</sup>. This conceptual frame and political views were for a long period of time alien to the Sovietic society.

Lev Gumilev<sup>81</sup> has however expressed his thinking during the Soviet period, being sometimes persecuted for doing so and not meeting any particular popular welcoming among the academia. He developed a theory based on long-term approach which asserted that the socio-political genesis of Russia was to be found in the model developed by the Golden Horde and the Mongol domination. Pizzolo reports that: “Russia’s historical ethnogenesis followed three important stages: that of the Kievan Rus’, of the Tatar domination, and of the rise of Muscovy” and that the Romanov era was an era of betrayal and forced-Europeanisation (2019, Pizzolo, P.).

Gumilev’s theory were welcomed in the nineties with great enthusiasm within Neo-Eurasianist groups in search of a response the *anomia* of the USSR’s collapse. These thinkers recycled Gumilev’s theory of socio-genesis and described the October revolution and the Soviet period as revolt against the “alien” Romanov cultural element. It saw in the USSR a return of the continental anchorage of Russia as the leading force of the Eurasian civilization. They inspired themselves of the “ideological features that belong both to the far-right and to the far-left political spectrum, combining them in the attempt to oppose Western post-liberalism characterized by the logics of individualism, consumerism, egoism, cultural imperialism, and unilinear globalism” (2019, Pizzolo, P.). The most vocal and famous defender of these theories is nowadays Aleksander Dugin an old-believer<sup>82</sup>, traditionalist and also for many neo-fascist thinkers which advocates for the articulation of Russia’s geopolitics upon the frame of Eurasianism.

To summarize, the Eurasianist nowadays advocate for the restoration of an imperial mode of government on the Eurasian landmass. This movement is characterized by a very strong anti-Western and anti-liberal inclination. It borrows from Carl Schmitt the dialectical opposition of the “whale” and the “elephant”. Namely, the dialectical clash of sea-based empires and earth-based empires and the confrontation of their *nomos*. Russia being of course

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<sup>80</sup> I do not intend to display a long and complete overview of this movement, neither do I mention its first authors nor do I develop its internal struggles etc. My aim is rather to show its influence in contemporary geopolitics.

<sup>81</sup> (1912-1992), a Sovietic ethnologist and historian which had developed theories on ethnogenesis.

<sup>82</sup> The most traditionalist branch of the ROC, which refuses the amendments brought in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the Patriarch Nikon.

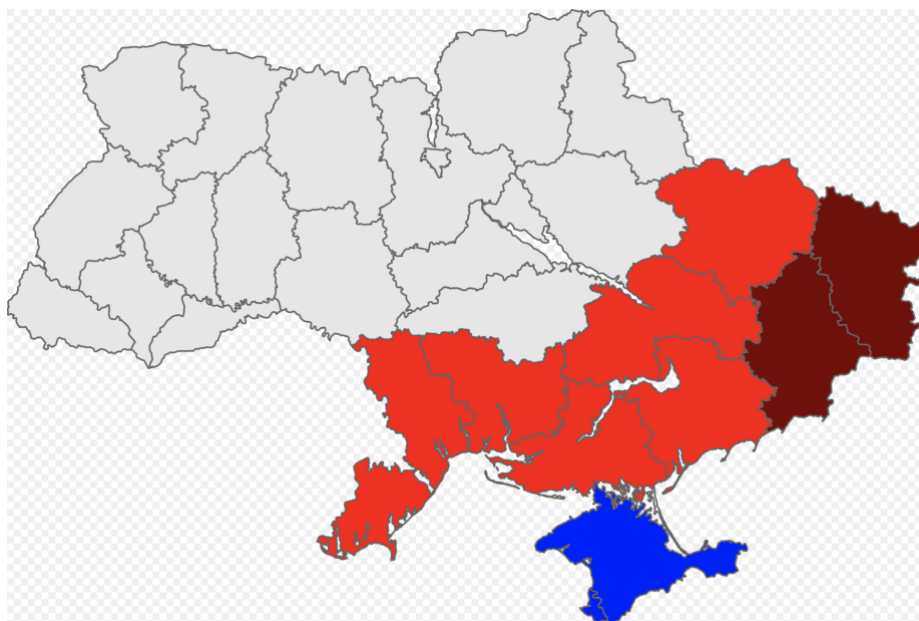


the spearhead of earth-based powers against the Anglo-civilization (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the United Kingdom and nowadays the United States). Eurasianism is also fed by ideas *en vogue* in the conservative circles such as the Izborsky Club and supports a strong Statism and the desire to make alliances with similar political entity which are to be in the same “camp”: Iran, China or Germany; all being nations based on rooted on earth, contrarily to their flowing cosmopolitan counterparts. This opposition is viewed as an ineluctable fatality that shapes Russia’s destiny, interestingly, one may note the presence of a *katechonic* stance in this worldview.

It is noteworthy to mention that Eurasianist are present among the Russian *intelligentsiya*, nonetheless, they also significantly penetrated the Western far-right intellectual field with some thinkers that embrace this worldview and defend its validity (2019, Pizzolo, P.).

#### Subsection 2.c : Novorossiya as a Melting Pot for Contemporary Ideologies.

The following map (Source: Wikipedia) displays the full territory of Ukraine. In grey, are figuring the part which is not included in this irredentist project. In blue, Crimea, in dark red the separationist Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Finally, in light red figures the territory whose addition to the ones previously mentionned would have formed *Novorossiya*. In fact, the defenders of this project never gained control of the light red territories and the control of the dark red ones by separatists wasn’t fully operational.



The term *Novorossiia* which means “New Russia” was historically the name given to that territory which used to be a province of the Russian Empire during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These territories had been won at the expense of the Ottoman Empire and of the Khanate of Crimean Tatar. Thus, these lands were populated of a majority of ethnic Ukrainians and Tatar along minorities of Jews, Greek and other groups. A policy of Russian settlement in the region started from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and, really became a major phenomenon with the industrialization of *Novorossiia* which took place from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It led to a significant russification of these lands. We can argue that policy ended up with the formation of Russian “islands” in the region – the famous “side chapels” of the “Russian Cathedral” that Aleksander Prokhanov praises.

It also became one of the most strategic areas for the Russian Empire, and later on, for the USSR. We remember of Sergey Einstein’s masterpiece *Battleship Potemkin* which narrates the 1905’s mutiny in the Black Sea and in the port of Odessa. This region was the sole access of the regimes to the “warm seas” and the gathering point of the Russian fleet. It was also a mining basin and an area which concentrated industries.

The following table shows very well this dynamic by pointing out the most spoken language in each administrative unit: (Source: Russian Imperial Census 1897).

| Language         | Odessa  | Yekaterinoslav | Nikolaev | Kherson | Sevastopol | Mariupol | Donetsk district |
|------------------|---------|----------------|----------|---------|------------|----------|------------------|
| Russian          | 198,233 | 47,140         | 61,023   | 27,902  | 34,014     | 19,670   | 273,302          |
| Jewish (sic)     | 124,511 | 39,979         | 17,949   | 17,162  | 3,679      | 4,710    | 7                |
| Ukrainian        | 37,925  | 17,787         | 7,780    | 11,591  | 7,322      | 3,125    | 177,376          |
| Polish           | 17,395  | 3,418          | 2,612    | 1,021   | 2,753      | 218      | 82               |
| German           | 10,248  | 1,438          | 813      | 426     | 907        | 248      | 2,336            |
| Greek            | 5,086   | 161            | 214      | 51      | 1,553      | 1,590    | 88               |
| Total Population | 403,815 | 112,839        | 92,012   | 59,076  | 53,595     | 31,116   | 455,819          |

Russian ethnics and/or speakers are majoritarian in some of these regions, most notably in Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk. In the other ones, Russian is very often the native or second language spoken within families, even among those who are not ethnically Russians. This had for effect the replacement of a population by another. If this has not generated any problem in the frame of the Russian Empire nor did it during the Soviet Union, the collapse of USSR



changed this framework. We have already widely cover the subject which can be summarized in three points : first, the arousal of separatists claims started I the region from the fall of the USSR and were not listened at by Russia ; second, the Ukrainians vocally expressed twice (2004 and 2014) their disapproval of Russia’s influence on the country ; third, Russia’s foreign policy evolved towards a harsher regional policy in the former Soviet space, echoing some irredentist features and adopting its cultural and civilizational turn.

In the context of the Ukrainian second Revolution, the protection of Russian minorities – in the name of the Medvedev doctrine – was invoked by the Russian Federation as a motif which allows it to have a say on what happens there. This infamously led to the annexation of Crimea and the war in Easter Ukraine. The disputed territory, was, in this context called *Novorossiya*, which is, from what we just explained a highly symbolic reference. This theme is even considered a “modern utopia” or as a “nationalist mythmaking” for Russian nationalist (2019, Laruelle, M. ; 2015, Laruelle, M.)

The project of *Novorossiya* aimed at the creation of a secessionist confederation upon the territories of Donetsk, Luhansk and on with the project of annexing the southern coastal regions of Ukraine up to Transnistria. It is interesting to see that this project met a formidable support among the conservative audience and circles and was called the “Russian Spring”. If the project failed (it was abandoned in 2015) and did not met an outstanding support from the Kremlin’s officials, it is interesting to analyze it as a “case study” which demonstrates the new fashion of Russian *intelligentsiya* and the upcoming of a geographic metanarrative.

Marlène Laruelle shows very well how all the segments of Russian intelligentsiya gathered up in support of this project in a very sensitive Izborsky spirit, what she calls the “three colors” of *Novorossiya* (2015, Laruelle, M.):

- The “Reds” saw in this project a restoration of one the most important region of the USSR and a demonstration of Russia’s determination to regain its “Great Power” status upon this “stolen” land.
- The “Whites” saw in it an occasion to regain the core of the Kievan Rus’ and a move towards the restauration of the Holy Rus’. Similar arguments were raised by monarchist and ethno-nationalist which shared the necessity to save threatened Russians.

- The “Browns” saw in this conflict-project the realization of their long-awaited fight against the West and a first step towards the progressive formation of their continent empire.

Averyanov, the Secretary of the Izborsky Club, summarizes this merging of ideologies very well, saying that: “the ideology of Novorossiia will be built on three principles: Russian identity – brotherhood of Eastern Slavs, Orthodoxy, and an avant-garde socialist construction” (2015, Laruelle, M.). It is also very relevant to note that war heroes arose in this conflict; Igor Strelkov is the most typical example of that “heroization”.

The arousal of this utopia and all that we previously said in this essay, shows us the sensitivity and the degree of penetration of ideology in contemporary Russia. I would like to try to highlight in the following chapter that a subsequent share of this ideological apparatus can be analyzed in the light of Carl Schmitt’s works.

#### **Chapter IV : The Western Question : “Carl Schmitt in Moscow”.**

“To me the *katechon* represents the only possibility of understanding history as a Christian and finding it meaningful” C. Schmitt, *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947–1951*

This Chapter should be considered the acme of this dissertation, or, the focal point in which I try to draw the contours of what is to me the most important part of this work. As a disclaimer, I do not think that it excludes the influence of other authors, and I do not pretend that Russia’s leaders scrupulously follow Carl Schmitt’s theories as a coherent ideology.

I will present Carl Schmitt’s conceptual and philosophical apparatus in order to highlight this connection. Schmitt was born in the German Empire 1888 and died in 1985 in German Federal Republic. His political philosophy is characterized by a reliance on Christianity, absolutism and anti-liberal thought. He was from the twenties an important member of the intellectual scene of his times but quickly became marginalized because of his ambiguous attitude towards the nazi regime. In spite of this, he kept publishing and debating with major intellectual figures of his times: from Hannah Arendt, Alexandre Kojève, Giorgio Agamben, Leo Strauss or Raymond Aron who all affirm the importance of his thought. He also had a strong posthumous influence in political theory, political philosophy and legal critical theory thanks to his main

works : *Political Theology* (1922), *The Concept of the Political* (1932), *The Nomos of the Earth* (1950), *The Theory of the Partisan* (1962).

Linking Carl Schmitt to the politics deployed by the Federation of Russia is viable since this author proposes alternative definitions of concepts that usual are consensual among the academia. These definitions often carry the anti-liberal ideology of that author and meet the aspiration of the Federation to nurtured its civilizationist and distinctive stance.

My argument is that his works provide us a conceptual framework which helps us to understand the specific *praxis* of Russia in the international and regional arenas. Similarly, it helps us to understand Russia's willingness to produce metapolitics and to challenge the Western hegemony. I think that the dialectic relation between *praxis* and metapolitics that I have tried to instill in this work is best understood in the light of Carl Schmitt's works; notably via concepts like "Sovereignty", "*Nomos*", "the Political", "the Exception", the "Self and Other" dialectic, "*Großräume*" or the "*Katechon*".

I would also like to affirm that I am not trying to link Carl Schmitt's commitment in the Third Reich as a jurist and political philosopher to the politics deployed today in Russia. Making Carl Schmitt himself a zealous protagonist of the nazi regime is also not easily demonstrable. In the one hand, his conceptual apparatus and his early support to the Nazi regime certainly gave a justification to the nazi regime in some points, despite the fact that he has quickly been evicted of all official bodies (1935). In the other hand, the fact that many of his political and philosophical views were openly opposing the regime's politics incites us to prudence. In other words, asserting such a proposal is not of my competence and this topic is not a consensual one among the academia<sup>83</sup>. I invite the lector interested in this issue to refer to the concluding part of Martin Motte's paper (2011, Motte, M.). The easy syllogism which would link Russia to Schmitt, and Schmitt to Nazism and thus *ipso facto* Russia to Nazism would be dishonest and it is not in any way the goal of this chapter. Instead, I would like to show, following the steps of Sergei Prozorov (2010, Prozorov, S.), that Schmitt's conceptual apparatus can shed a light on a critical understanding of Russia's geopolitics.

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<sup>83</sup> Of course, I wouldn't like to give the impression of narrowing Schmitt's commitment in the nazi regime and the responsibility that he carries. I am sure that the lector understand the complexity of balancing this issue.

I think that we may also draw a parallel, with a certain degree of levity, between the situation of the 1920's in Germany and today's Russia in terms of political consciousness. Effectively, both of these regimes do share a common sentiment of decay, a revanchism linked to their failure of the precedent confrontation with the "Other" and lay on weak institutional foundations. In this regard, it is interesting to link the current 'civilizational turn' with the 'conservative revolution that took place in the Weimar Republic from the twenties onwards. In effect, certain prominent actors of this movements have been cited as sources of influence for the new Russian intelligentsiya: for instance, Ernst Jungër, Martin Heidegger or Carl Schmitt (2015, Laruelle, M.) as these two intellectual movements do share a common rejection of liberalism, democracy and the assertion of a land-based distinctiveness.

The concepts that this chapter will be presenting and their connection to Russia's political *praxis* might appear a bit complex, I am aware of it. Thus, I will try in this chapter to be as synthetic as possible, and I will avoid digressions in order not to confuse the lector.

### *Section 1 : Fighting for "the Political".*

Roberto Esposito insists on the importance of the concept of "the Political"<sup>84</sup> in Schmitt's works and the cornerstone of his philosophical system. This raises the following question: what is "the Political" ? The Political is essentially the conflictual relation which unites elements as they interact, the "conflictual constitutive energy" (2014, Esposito, R.) and the force which crafts the existing order. This force is both a force which maintains and threatens the existing order. The leading motive of this force is, according to Schmitt, dialectical relation of the "friend – enemy" dichotomy which structures power relations. A relation which draw a line of enmity between members of the international system and organizes their interaction following this oppositional logic.

I would like to use once again this quotation that we mentionned in the introduction: "the metapolitical essence of the political lays in the tendency from a part to occupy the centrality, while submitting the other part to its domination" (2014, Esposito, R.). This means the Political *par excellence*'s aim is the exclusion of the enemy; by assimilating it or annihilating it. The

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<sup>84</sup> "Politischen" in German, a concept which he presents in : Schmitt, C. (1927), *Der Begriff des Politischen*. Referred to in its French edition in our bibliography.

history of the twentieth century, and the structuration of global politics on the West/East opposition is certainly one of the most vibrant examples of this antagonistic relation based on conflict between polities.

As mentioned it in the first paragraph, the conflictual essence of the political produces an order. The East/West divide of the world during the Cold War was a rather clear and consensual one. Speaking of today's order is more ambivalent. Concepts have flourished since the fall of the USSR to describe the international order: unipolar US hegemony, liberal-democratic order, multipolarity etc. This discursive process is mostly the result of a reflection on the Self and its place in this order. In the case of today's Russia, the order is essentially viewed as a US or Western hegemonic order which is to be combated via metapolitics and *praxis*. Russia's civilizationism is advanced, in our case as both the motif and the media of this confrontation.

We will see in the following subsection that the fight for the Political, or the Western-Russia confrontation is fostered in Russia by the desire to enhanced its mastery on its civilizational space and to affirm its autonomy vis-à-vis the Western world; this attempt being both a *pro domo* and an externally oriented one.

#### Subsection 1.a : Ordering the Empire.

The current revival of Russian neo-imperialism can be read in the light of the following notions that Schmitt presented in his works and which are reminiscent of some of the Kremlin's conceptual framework.

- *First*, we can extract the importance of the notion of *Sovereignty*. This concept being the core of Russia's discourses and political maneuvers. If this notion met, to a certain extent, kind of a dissolution in the context of a growing inter-connection of economies and political systems in the West, Russia firmly resists to this trend.

Schmitt states in a very limpid way the fact that the State sovereignty is to oppose this dynamic of inter-connectivity since the very existence of sovereignty guarantees a plurality of States which is the *sine qua none* condition of the international system based the confrontation of "sovereign equals" (2000, Rasch, W.). Schmitt's argument against internationalism or of an

approach based on “humanity” echoes the one of contemporary Russia which has always been a strong defender of this approach which is presented as serving the interest of the West<sup>85</sup>. Instead, Russia defends an approach based on the legitimacy of balances of power and defends its right to conflict (2015, Auer, S.) in a very Schmittian way which considers conflicts not as an evil and criminal attitude but as a legitimate continuity of politics because of the “normalization of conflicts” (2000, Rasch, W.).

- *Second*, the notion of sovereignty as presented by Schmitt is inextricably linked to the one of the *Sovereign*. Schmitt presents the Sovereign as the ultimate body which is in charge of exercising sovereignty by the mean of the decision on Exception: “Sovereign is he who decides on the Exception” (1922, Schmitt, C.).

This decisionist essence, placed in one single body, of the Schmittian theory of sovereignty can be attached to the *praxis* which is in play in Russia. If we know from our studies that decision-making in Russian is much more complex than it seems<sup>86</sup> there is a willingness in the Kremlin to present President Putin as the unwavering authority and as, precisely, the one “who decides on the Exception”. In this regard, the Sovereign can be democratically elected (even via a simulacre of elections) because the Sovereign is also given to have a “mystical connection between the masses and their leaders” (2018, Lewis, D.G.). The democratic element backs the Sovereign as long as the majority expresses its consent, whether by supporting him or not overcoming him. Such views are reminiscent of Surkov’s claiming that Putin has a connection to the Russian people (2020, Ackerman, G.).

That notion of Sovereign is not to be linked to Russian (or even French or American) Presidentialism since it makes no doubt that Putin’s role exceeds his legal functions. If constitutionalism plays a role in the distribution of power, the period of tandemocracy has shown very well shown that the Sovereign’s powers were not exclusively granted by constitutional provisions. This shows very well the primacy given to the Sovereign, which is driven by the political, at the expense of the legal order and of the rule of law. The Sovereign is then in charge of “incarnating” the legal order and eventually surpassing it (2009, Pasquier,

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<sup>85</sup> See Ch. II Sec. 1 Subsec. 1.a. and Russia’s criticisms of the ‘humanitarian interventions’ and of the instrumentalization of the international system.

<sup>86</sup> Notably because of the strong influence of opposed factions within the presidential administration.

E.). Then, Sovereignty is seen by Schmitt as a condition of the international system but also as an organizing force which structures the societies (internally) in a sovereign way.

- *Third*, the notion of *Grossräume*<sup>87</sup> that we already mentioned earlier in this dissertation can be considered as a source of legitimization to Russia's assertion of its power and mastery over the Russian sphere of influence.

The notion of *Grossräume* emerged in Schmitt's works during the thirties, it carries an odd and utterly disturbing stance which is reminiscent the one of *Lebensraum* (vital space) that was used by the Nazis to define the geographic matrix of the German "race" (and the necessity to exclude other "races" of this space). These two notions, however, are not equivalent since Schmitt's *Grossräume* is not backed by any racial pillar. His theory is rather founded on political and geopolitical mastery of the *Grossräume* by several political ensembles. We understand easily that such a theory meets a sympathetic reception among the Russian *élites* which tries to restore its influence over the former territories of the Soviet and Tsarist lands by asserting their civilizationist stance (2015, Auer, S.).

We have clearly seen that the idea of a needed restauration of a failed empire is very vivid among Russian conservative circles and seems to instill in all ladders of the *intelligentsiya*: in the media, in the Clubs and in the political *élites*. The aggressions in Georgia and in Eastern Ukraine can be seen as attempts to further empower a Russian *Grossräume* laying on a civilization. The originality of the *Grossräume* is its reliance on a tryptic characterized in German by the combination of the "*Raum*" (space), "*Volk*" (People) and "*Reich*" (Empire); these elements are of course seen today in the light of the Nazi's legacy but this is not what matters in this demonstration. We might argue that these three elements, taken together, are the condition of the imaginary that Russian intellectuals crafted in order to justify the evolution of spatial utopias such as the "Russian world", "Holy Rus" or "Novorossiia with the addition of a central culturalist element which characterizes and justifies the borders of the *Grossräume*, making it a distinct ensemble.

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<sup>87</sup> « Grand-spaces » in German.

- *Fourth* the notion of *Nomos*, which is, I think, probably the most relevant and demonstrative of these four since it embodies them all in a single and univocal way thanks to the very special nature of this notion. The *nomos* is to be understood as link between a soil and its legislative production (2011, Motte, M.).

This spatial conception of the *nomos* (or law, to simplify) reflects the importance, for Schmitt of the existence of alternatives *nomos*, which means that a *nomos* cannot be universal as the international law pretends to be (2013, Lievens, M.). Thus, the *nomos* carries the essential identity of a given land because of its uniqueness. We understand very well that the notion of *nomos* stands against any possibility of universal values or international law. I already mentioned the fact that Sergei Prozorov denied, in a paper in 2010 the existence of a Russian *nomos*. This author claimed that the post-Soviet space was, back then, an anomic space characterized by “*bespredel*”<sup>88</sup>. I think we can argue that Russia’s willingness to assert its ideological and civilizational distinctiveness vis-à-vis both the West and the East can be viewed as an attempt to shape a Eurasian *nomos* since it claims to rely on the peculiar “base culture” of the inhabitants of these lands.

Schmitt pleaded for a creation of a new *nomos* in the immediate aftermath of WWII. He however refused the upcoming of a unique global *nomos* which he thought it would be to tyranny. He calls for a “pluralism of grand-spaces, sphere of intervention, cultural zones” able to “recognize grand-spaces at their borders” (2011, Motte, M. quoting 1950, Schmitt, C.). This desire to avoid international unipolarity and to promote a decentralized and civilization-based order is reminiscent of Russia’s claims from the middle of the 2000’s.

These four elements seem to characterize in a very clear way the possibility of articulating Schmittian concept to an attempt to craft imperial politics inside the Russian society and, to a wider extent, in its sphere of influence. Now that we highlighted these possible domestic implications of the Schmittian conceptual apparatus, I would like to focus on a set of notion that this same author shaped in regard to the international order and to the theory of international relations.

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<sup>88</sup> « Absence of limits » in Russian.



### Subsection 1.b : Resistance and the Dialectical Opposition to the “Other”.

The Schmittian theory of international relations – if we can speak of such a thing – is less studied than his works on domestic legal orders. He never formulated *per se* a theory, however, his praising of the “*Jus Publicum Europaeum*” and his criticisms of the liberal theory of international relations can led us draw some hypothesis and some remarks on his appreciation of international relations (1950, Schmitt, C.). Instead of forming a theory of IR, Schmitt proposes an analysis of metapolitical confrontations via the conflict between *nomos* and *Grossräume* which can be seen, from what we mentionned in the previous section, a critical theory of international relations.

First and foremost, we can recall that Schmitt believes in the ineluctability of conflict, and even more, in the conflictuality as the motor of the “Political” as we already have shown in the introduction of this Chapter. In the context of international relations, this primacy given to antagonism takes the shape of a conflictual international order which is by essence focusing on the clash between two or more factions engaged in a metapolitical struggle whose aim is always that of stealing the other’s share. This curse of never-ending waves of violence is, in the eyes of Schmitt, the result of the corrupted nature of mankind and are not likely to be avoided by any means. Virtues are even found in external conflicts as they avoid the upcoming of civil wars and intestine conflicts. If Russia is not committed in a more important number of conflict than its western counterparts, it certainly relies on a warlike rhetoric which draws a line between the West and itself. This warlike rhetoric takes the shape of a vivid antagonism and the designation of a counterpart as the “universal Other”. A dialectical designation which depicts this “Other” as the antinomy of the Self on all ladders.

I would like the lector to take the following quote from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation as a starting point, to what will follow It is extracted from an article published in a journal of foreign affairs sympathetic to the political leaders and gives us an idea of the tone of the Kremlin’s officials vis-à-vis the West: (2021, Lavrov, S.)

“By expanding sanctions and other illegitimate coercive measures against sovereign states, the West promotes totalitarian rule in global affairs, assuming an imperial, neo-colonial stance in its relations with third countries. They are asked to adopt the democratic rule under the model of the Western choosing, and forget about democracy in international affairs, since someone will be deciding everything for them. All that is asked of these third countries is to keep quiet, or face reprisals.”

The tonality – which is widespread in public discourses – reflects very well the antagonism that Russia built towards the West. It is a commonplace to assert in international affairs that opposing states do nourish a mutual anger, it was even depicted as “trap” by Thucydides back in Classical Greece when this one narrates the growth of Athens and the “trap” which forces Spartan to declare the war in an ultimate attempt to counter this growth. Schmitt however does not fall in this somewhat to simple analysis. Schmitt focuses on the role played by the designation of the enemy as a motor for struggles between states. He considers the distinction between the friend and the enemy a central if not primary element of “the political”<sup>89</sup>. Effectively, the enemy is to be “existentially something different and alien” (2009, Hell, J.) since its very existence is seen as the driving force which motivates the behavior of the political subject. Thus, Russia and the West are engaged in a struggle which overcomes them.

This does not mean that Russia is in a continuous state of warfare *vis-à-vis* the West. Schmitt in a text published in October 1939 the *Schriften der Akademie für Deutsches Recht* proposes a reinterpretation of the proverbial quote from Cicero “*inter bellum et pacem nihil medium*”<sup>90</sup> which is published for the first time in French thanks to the translation of Céline Jouin (2021, Jouin, C.). Schmitt defends the idea that this quote is not correct since the upcoming of a war rely on a set of conditions. He sees the matrix of WWII in the Treaty of Versailles and in the arrival of irregular means of warfare: propaganda, political economy or international law. He says “The diktat of Versailles’ peace has wanted to make of peace ‘a continuation of war by other means’ (...) shaping it legally as a pacific, normal and definitive status quo” (2021, Jouin, C.). He criticizes the attempt of a definition of “a true war” by the Society of Nations and affirms that it is impossible to do so, as much as it is impossible to define “a true peace” since these two notions constantly overlaps each-other, especially in the frame of treaties like the one of Versailles which is, in his own words: “worse than nothing”. This is reminiscent of the discourses or behavior which Russia carries on two different ladders:

- First, Schmitt’s critic of the *inter bellum et pacem nihil medium* is of a very vocal actuality when we see the deployment of the hybrid warfare and of the informational confrontations worldwide and, most notably, in the Russian context. Russia has been an

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<sup>89</sup> We remember from our introduction to Ch. IV that “the political” designates the conflictual essence of any socio-political order.

<sup>90</sup> From the Latin “Between war and peace, it exists not middle ground”.

efficient and pioneer actor of these methods, notably in the attempts to counter democratism domestically and abroad. The hybridity of the modes of conflicts being one of Russia's great success in the last decades; e.g. Russia Today/Sputnik, Wagner Group as an irregular force, Eastern Ukraine hybrid conflict. (2017, Baev, P. K)

- Second, Schmitt's critic of the international law as an attempt "to make of peace 'a continuation of war by other means'" (2021, Jouin, C.) echoes the growing criticism that Russia expresses on the international order and of the post-Soviet *nomos* (2010, Prozorov, S.).

Similarly, a constant criticism of the West's "totalitarian rule in global affairs, assuming an imperial, neo-colonial stance in its relations with third countries" (2021, Lavrov, S.) has been deployed to foster Russia's agenda in international affairs and nurtured its attempts to craft an alternative discourse on the international order (2016, Kurylo, B.).

The opposition between the USSR and the Western world (or rather the US) is the driving force of the history of the second half of the twentieth century and the revival (or continuation) of the metapolitical struggles between those two is interesting to read in the light of Carl Schmitt theory of the Self and the Other. There is a consensus in the literature on the depiction of the US as the "Other" in Russia. It played an important role in shaping the Russian consciousness in the previous century with the cleavages on communism/capitalism and has been actualized by the renaissance of this confrontation on the basis of the new metapolitical confrontation of those two, laying on the basis of the conservatism/traditionalism vs. liberalism/internationalism framework. (2017, Zhuravleva, V. I.)

This metapolitical struggle between Russia and the US is revelatory of the "agonistic ethic" (1968, Gernet, L.) which is definitely a mega trend in Russian history. We can argue, by developing a Hegelo-Kojèveian pattern that the US/Russia confrontation is a struggle for recognition in the context of the post-Soviet failure as the absence of enmity or conflictuality constitutes an ontological vacuum for political subjects. This has been particularly clear in Putin's celebration of the recognition by the President Biden of Russia as a systemic problem for the US in the last summit of Geneva in 2021.

It is fascinating to note Russia's revanchism lays not only on a rational analysis of the balances of powers but also, and this is, I guess, the peak of whole essay, on a messianic basis. I intend to decrypt this phenomenon by trying to highlight the references to eschatology and the vast share given to messianism in what I believe to be the acme of Russian metapolitics: the notion of *Katechon*.

#### Subsection 1.c : Russia as a "Katechon".

In her article called: "*Nikolai Berdiaev and the Origins of Russian Messianism*" Ana Siljak (2016, Siljak, A.) highlights the following trend:

"Russian messianism as a means of defining Russia as essentially "other"—with its "Eastern" spirituality, apocalyptic yearnings, and fundamental desire for world supremacy. This theory has been accepted as a truism to such an extent that many works on the subject have provided no citations for assertions of the existence and power of the Russian messianic ideal. (...) The unquestioning acceptance of Russian messianism as an explanatory concept has important ramifications for the study of Russia. Phenomena that beg for international comparative analysis—Russian imperialism, Russian Marxism, Russian autocratic rule—are, under the theory of messianism, easily categorized as uniquely related to Russia's history and Orthodox culture. Russian messianism has become, in Western scholarship in particular, one of the last "essentializing" paradigms to remain unchallenged."

A specialist of these questions, she criticizes the reference of messianism as a self-explanatory phenomenon to describe Russia's behavior from a Western perspective. I wouldn't like to give the impression of running into such an epistemologic mistake. My wish is to show that the *Katechon*<sup>91</sup> and its messianic side is present in the metapolitical field and is a key item for who wants to understand the meta-narratives which (partially) structures Russia's self-projection in foreign affairs.

In the same spirit than Pierre Salvadori's (2017, Salvadori, P.) paper on the eschatological discourses of the American far-right in *Le Grand Continent*, I will try to show that the study of the *Katechon* in Russia breaks a sum of axioms on Russia and helps us to grasp the complexity of that country. The study of the *Katechon* has known a growing popularity from the end of the nineties and constitutes, I think, a major object of study of political theory. Its importance has been highlighted by prominent authors and academia members such as: Maria Engström,

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<sup>91</sup> Katechon, in Ancient Greek : "ὁ κατέχω", the force which restrains, the Restrainer, something/someone that prevents from the chaos, maintains the order.

Marlène Laruelle, Sergei Prozorov, Carl Schmitt which all played a role in shaping the path of this work.

The *Katechon* is a biblical notion introduced by the Apostle Paul in the First Letter of the Epistle to the Thessalonians. It has one single mention in the entire Scriptures in the following occurrence:

“Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called God or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. (...) You know what it is that is now holding him back, so that he will be revealed when the time comes. For the mystery of anomy is already at work, but only until the person now holding him back (*ho katechon*) is removed. Then the lawless one (*anomos*) will be revealed, whom the Lord will abolish with the breath of his mouth, rendering him inoperative by the manifestation of his presence (*parousia*).”

We understand from reading it a reference to John’s apocalypse and the final fight between the forces of God and the Antichrist. Assimilating the lexical field of “restraining/holding back” the “lawless one” is of the highest importance to understand the complexity of our demonstration. Tertullian, an Early Church Father, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D associates the biblical notion of *Katechon* to the stabilizing force of the Roman Empire which restrains the political order from falling into chaos (2009, Hell, J.). Tertullian operates a transfer of the *Katechon* from the Celestial to the Terrestrial order, making a move which will have a major consequence: the secularization of the notion of *Katechon*. Thus, the notion of *Katechon* transforms in political terms the eschatological discourse of the end of times and places it on the ground of the confrontation between empires; the adversary’s “anomia” is seen as a force which needs to be “restrained” in order to maintain the just order.

Sergei Prozorov reports that the *Katechon* structures the modern theory of the state, “which thinks of it as a power destined to block or delay catastrophe”. Thus, the *katechon* aims at securing the *nomos* of a given political entity and tries to prevent the advent of “anomic forces of anarchy or revolution that threaten to dissolve the ethical order of the community” as the “logic of *katechon* succinctly sums the very manner of being of political power as a restraining force that prevents the unraveling of the social order.” (2010, Prozorov, S.).

The notion of *Katechon* is also central to Schmitt’s philosophical system, who sees the katechonic behavior as the ultimate and paroxysmal expression of the Sovereign’s will and power since the legitimacy of this latter lays on its ability to restrain chaos and conserve its

*nomos*. At this stage of the essay, we understand very well the essential role of the notion of order for Schmitt, but also for Russia.

The struggle against the “Other” that was mentioned in the previous subsection is, indeed, a *katechonic* feature and the confrontations of Russia (whether it is Tsarist, Soviet or Putinist, since they all shared an alike rhetoric<sup>92</sup>) against its enemy is to be read with the prism of the *Katechon*. We already mentioned earlier the popularity among Eurasianist circles of the Schmittian theory of land-based and sea-based powers; we will see that the Schmittian theory of the *Katechon* is also enthusiastically welcomed in Russia. That notion typically fits into the ‘Izborsky spirit’ of today’s *intelligentsiya*. We can witness its presence of the *Katechon* in the writings of Dugin, Kholmogorov, Malofeev, Prokhanov etc. which all see it as a justification for fostering their project of uniting the Eurasian lands in the expectation of the coming war. It even became one of Malofeev’s favorite ideological item up to becoming the name of his website and think-tank which edits geopolitical and societal papers on a variety of issues (notably a fair share of fake information).

If the notion of *Katechon* was already popular among conservative and religious circles in Russia because of the reliance of these circles on the legacy of the imperial period, the *Katechon* has certainly known a strong revival in the context of the ‘civilizational turn’. The growing antagonism between the liberal-democratic West and the traditional conservative Russia is seen in Russia as a *Katechonic* fight in which the Russian *nomos* is challenged by the decaying ideology of the Western world (2014, Engström, M.). This *nomos* being threatened by the Western atheist, deconstructionist, liquid stance; in other words – anomic – projection of the social order.

Thus, Russia is to resist to this anomic offensive of the West by further developing its spiritual and ethical sovereignty against the liberal “empire”. It can be seen in a wide range of discourses and it seems to be one of the forces which has driven the ‘cultural turn’. When Putin assesses that: “They (the West) reject moral foundations and any traditional identity, be it national, cultural, religious or even sexual” (2014, Putin, V.) or more recently when Lavrov says that “All world religions, the genetic code of the planet’s key civilisations, are under attack. The United States is at the forefront of state interference in church affairs, openly seeking to drive

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<sup>92</sup> Similar reasoning popped-up across Russia’s history : the Antichristic force being successively the Turks, Napoléon’s *Grande Armée*, the Nazis and, nowadays, US/Western liberalism.

a wedge into the Orthodox world, whose values are viewed as a powerful spiritual obstacle for the liberal concept of boundless permissiveness.” (2021, Lavrov, S.) both of them directly rely on *katechonic* stances which are no coincidence. These mentions of an anomic and foreign threat doom Russia to interpose itself as a bulwark against a chaotic order.

### Conclusion :

I have thought that the prism of civilizational discourse was the most relevant way of presenting Russian metapolitical production in the context of the ‘cultural turn’ and of the growing assertion of Russia’s distinctiveness. I believe that understanding historical dynamics characterized by their *longue-durée* can shed a light on the epistemologic item that this dissertation investigated. I have tried to do it by analyzing the evolution of the civilizational idea in Russia. I also tried to decrypt the concrete political implications that this frame generated via an analysis of the *praxis* of the Russian state correlated to this matter.

We saw that civilization has been, over the times, one of the hot topics among the intellectual circles in Russia. The specific ethnic, cultural, religious, historical and territorial anchorage of Russia is not facilitating the expression of a single and clear explanation of their identity.

We saw that the Russian political *élites*, engaged in the turmoil of de-sovietization has hesitated on the path to adopt to define themselves. The case of Russia is a somewhat special one. Nowadays, many would say that the adoption of the Sovietic ideology was a betrayal of the Russian identity, an uneven attempt to deny Russia’s national *ethos*. It is true that the 1917 Revolution overturned the structures of the pre-revolutionary Russian society and altered “Russianness”. The “catastrophic” collapse of the USSR led Russia in a spiritual, ethical and geographical void. Among the many directions which the Russian society have followed, the political *élites* conducted Russia towards a conservative and traditionalist path. President Putin called it a “natural” return to the roots. This raises the existence of a Russian “essence”: a set of pre-existing characteristics that allows us to discriminate without any doubt a Russian element from a non-Russian element and to extract a pure unit of Russia: what many like to call the ‘*russkaya dusha*’ (Russian soul). A subsequent share of the civilizational discourse in Russia tends to go in that direction by assessing the existence of a quintessential ‘Russianness’

which fundamentally separates Russia from the rest of world and designs its likeliness for some forms of power, religion, sociability etc.

Russia has been looking for recognition and the restauration of its status of “Great Power”, this was successful enterprise but this did not suffice to the strategists of the Kremlin. They operated a shift from “great-powerness” to “civilizationism”. We have seen in this dissertation the efforts made by the political *élites* to deploy this narrative in the society. This took several forms: from harsh repression of the opposition to the widespread propaganda on all channels of information. Muzzling the opposition was a mean for the ruling *élites* to avoid the birth of any narrative which could threaten its supremacy in the discursive battleground. The liberals and the modernizers used to propose an alternative to the civilizationist idea within the medias, they do not anymore because of the repression. I have come to believe that the treatment of the liberal opposition and the adoption of the civilizationist stance were part of a same dynamic aiming at shaping a single and unitary political item: the Russian civilizationist *nomos* which lays on the exclusion of any liberal element. I have tried to demonstrate that this characterizes Russian politics since the middle of the 2000’s.

The ‘cultural turn’, the radicalization of the relations with the West, the annexation of lands in the near-abroad, the hunt of ‘foreign agents’ and the “nationalization of the *élites*” are constitutive of a shift in Russian politics. This whole work has been an attempt to grasp the relationship that fosters *metapolitics* and *praxis* in Russia. I have tried to highlight that these two items are united by a dialectical relationship which allows the political *élite* to justify its *praxis* thanks to the ideological provisions of *metapolitics*. One might deny the metapolitical character of Russia’s ideological production, arguing that Russian conservatism is a somewhat ‘classical’ anti-establishment conservatism. This would, I think, misconceive the design of the Kremlin. Russian conservatism anti-liberalism is original since it presents itself as an alternative to the Western model of government. There is a clear willingness to export this model and to support via a web of alliances with alike regimes or political parties around the world. This includes the financing of Eurosceptic forces in the European Union, the criticism of the liberal agenda in the international affairs, support to anti-Western forces across the globe (e.g. China, Syria, Iran) and the promotion of a culturalist agenda which is not foreign to the ubiquity of debates about identity across the Western world. This is one of the achievements of Russian *metapolitics*, across the West, and, across the world we can observe that the *zeitgeist* often lays on identity, civilization and alike topics. This is not the fruit of Russian influence in the field of



metapolitic activity, yet, its contribution to this is topic very efficient and penetrated US's and Europeans societies. I have tried, to highlight the importance of Carl Schmitt conceptual apparatus in contemporary Russian politics in the field of anti-liberalism, counter-revolutionary politics and in his appreciation of the political importance of space which, I think, all three play a key role in Russian politics.

We also saw the essential role that geography plays in Russia's civilizational discourse. The porosity of frontiers and identities in post-Imperial and post-Soviet space being a cornerstone of several competing historical and geographical metanarratives. The references to the former domination of the Kremlin's hosts over the Eurasian space nurtured an irredentist stance which is widespread among the political *élite* and whose side effects can be seen in Ukraine. The immensity of the Russian geography being both, in this regard, a source of power and a source of ontological anxiety which is fed by the terror of a western intrusion into this space.

We asked ourselves, in the introduction, the following question: is Russia's driven by an official ideology? A crude and direct answer would be no. Politics and daily-life do not follow an ideological pattern which drives every decision. The Kremlin has, in the past two decades, shown willingness to opportunistic and sometimes paradoxical choices which are not likely to fit in the rigid frame of an official ideology (e.g. referring to the glories of the Russia Orthodox Church and of the atheist Sovietic state). Nonetheless, we can clearly point-out the existence of a set of values which remains constant and instill all segments of the public life: statism, conservatism, revanchism, anti-liberalism, religiosity and anti-Westernism. Still, these values however do not constitute a coherent ideology. I came to the conclusion that Russian politics are best perceived in the prism of the concept of *Katechon*. The concept of *Katechon* frames an image of the Russian state-civilization sympathetic to the Kremlin's worldview both in domestic and foreign affairs while avoiding for Russian leaders the burden of an official state ideology.

It is very interesting to note that the *Katechonic* element in Russia embraces the three topics of this dissertation in a fulfilling way since *metapolitics*, *praxis* and *civilizational identity* are merged into one unique item: the *Katechon*. The affirmation of the Russian state-civilization as the *Katechon* constitutes a coherent narrative which allows the political *élites* and the *intelligentsiya* to picture themselves in a historical and sacred mission: preserving the Russian civilizational *nomos* against the alleged Western anomia. This can be considered a positive

counter-revolutionary attitude. Interestingly, the metapolitical offensive which Russia is driving is concentrated against the Western world which is likely to be presented as the source of every ills in Russia: very few mentions of the systemic threat caused by China emerged in the public discourses, neither is Russia's demographical collapse resolved with references to the *Katechon*. Thus, in many extents, this concept and the whole mass of *praxis* that it carries is a fig leaf to hide Russia's systemic weaknesses.

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