

SCTMG 2020**International Scientific Conference «Social and Cultural Transformations in the
Context of Modern Globalism»****RUSSIAN CIVILIZATION IN THE SEARCH OF IDENTITY IN
NEW GEOPOLITICAL CONDITIONS**

Viktor Avksentev (a), Boris Aksiumov (b), Galina Gritsenko (c), Svetlana Ivanova (d)*,
Aleksey Lagunov (e)
*Corresponding author

(a) Federal Research Center Southern Scientific Center of Russian Academy of Sciences,
41, Chekhov Avenue, Rostov-on-Don, 344006, Russia, avksentiev@rambler.ru,

(b) North-Caucasus Federal University, 1, Pushkin Street, Stavropol, 355017, Russia, aksbor@mail.ru,

(c) Federal Research Center Southern Scientific Center of Russian Academy of Sciences,
41, Chekhov Avenue, Rostov-on-Don, 344006, Russia, dissovet@rambler.ru,

(d) Federal Research Center Southern Scientific Center of Russian Academy of Sciences,
41, Chekhov Avenue, Rostov-on-Don, 344006, Russia, isu-socf@yandex.ru,

(e) North-Caucasus Federal University, 1, Pushkin Street, Stavropol, 355017, Russia, emailag@mail.ru

Abstract

The collapse of the Soviet Union gave rise to a new geopolitical, cultural and civilizational reality – post-Soviet Russia. Having overcome many crises, Russia is again becoming a real power capable of intensively influencing the geopolitical transformations of the modern world. The paper emphasizes that it is the geopolitics that primarily determines the vectors of Russian civilization's search for its identity. Russia's post-Soviet history clearly identifies two main stages of geopolitical and civilizational self-determination. The first, coming in the 1990s and partly in the early 2000s, was characterized by the desire of new political elites to integrate as much as possible into western structures and institutions. Being liberal-minded and perceiving the West as an unconditional winner in the cold war, Russian political leaders, with substantial popular support, saw the West as the most attractive civilizational center. At this point, the West had a unique opportunity to turn Russia into a reliable partner for a long time. However, old stereotypes about Russia's a priori hostility took over. Disappointment in the West, which absorbed not only the political elite, but also a substantial part of the population, led to Russia's geopolitical and civilizational reorientation from the West to the East. The paper concludes that the "focus on the East" that Russia has in recent years does not necessarily mean that the existing conflict with the West is enhancing. All parties to geopolitical confrontation should understand that many problems of modern times can only be solved by joint efforts.

2357-1330 © 2020 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: Russian civilization, geopolitical, Eurasianism, West, Euro-Atlanticism, civilization choice.



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1. Introduction

Having extensively overcome the crisis of the post-Soviet period, Modern Russia is again becoming an influential actor of geopolitical relations. Active position in the Ukrainian crisis and military campaign in Syria are expressive symptoms of Russia's revival as one of the great powers. Western science is dominated by a negative image of Russia's role in the modern world: either the renewal of the empire and the relaxation of the West (Freudenstein, 2014), or the restoration of the Soviet Union and the carve-up of Europe (Orenstein, 2015). However, modern Russia is an entity that has not yet found itself. Russia's civilizational identity has not been formed (Maslovskiy, 2018), and thus the country faces serious problems: the legacy of the last century, when the country twice changed its social and cultural appearance, is too contradictory.

When analyzing the formation of Russia's civilization identity in the new geopolitical conditions it is necessary to take into account a number of important factors and circumstances, which are both internal and external in nature. First, modern Russian civilization can no longer, unlike pre-Soviet Russia, build its sociocultural foundation on the basis of Orthodoxy. The impossibility of such an option is connected, on the one hand, with multi-religious population (in the modern democratic world this should be taken into account), and, on the other hand, with the strengthening of traditions of secularism, which were laid in the Soviet times and are deeply rooted in the public consciousness. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that certain values traditionally associated with Orthodoxy still have an impact on Russian society and Russian culture. Second, the influence of the Soviet past on modern Russian civilization is too obvious not to be noticed. The geopolitical disaster associated with the collapse of the Soviet Empire affected the mentality of entire generations. The revival of Russia as an important geopolitical actor is seen by many as the compensation for the loss of former power. Third, in order to create projects aimed at the development of Russia, capable of ensuring a successful future of Russian civilization with its vast territories and newly emerging ambitions, the ideology of global provinces, imposed on the country at the end of the last century, is not suitable. In this regard, some Western analysts talk about the "superiority complex" (Neumann, 2016), but in fact this means reducing the cultural phenomenon to a simple paradigm of inferiority/superiority. Fourth, as the events of recent decades show, especially China's leap, the rapid development of India and a number of Muslim countries, ideologies based on the ideas of communitarianism are beginning to gain a historical advantage over individualistic ideologies. Liberal theory has always implied that communitarian societies are lagging behind, that they have no prospects in the modern world. However, the facts show the opposite – it is the societies based on the model of subordination of personal interests to the interests of society and the state that are more viable than those where the value of personal freedom is absolutized, even contrary to rational state interests. Finally, fifth, and this is directly linked to the previous paragraph, the center of gravity of the global development is gradually moving to the Asian region. This trend is beneficial to Russia because its historical location between the West and the East could be a major geopolitical advantage. In this sense, it is quite natural that Asia is beginning to play a more prominent role in the Russian civilization search (Pandey, 2017).

2. Problem Statement

The current development stage of the Russian civilization came at a time of a new geopolitical crisis replicating the models of relations between Russia and the West typical for previous similar crises. Geopolitical crises throughout history have stimulated civilizational choices and the self-determination of Russian civilization. Similarly, and today, it is geopolitical complications that determine the necessity and define the specific vectors of Russia's civilizational self-determination. In this regard, the understanding of the trends of cultural and civilizational development of the country primarily depends on the understanding of the modern geopolitical configuration of the world.

3. Research Questions

The period since the end of the cold war, given the acceleration of global development, has incorporated different configurations of relations between Russia and the West. Russia's pro-Western orientations, which implied the possibility of the deepest integration, were first replaced by a tendency to maintain a stable partnership and then, especially after Ukrainian events, by mutual mistrust in the spirit of the "bipolar system". The paper is aimed to solve the question concerning the reasons behind the reconfiguration of Russian-Western relations, the prospects of these relations, the role that the geopolitics played and still plays in relations between Russia and the West.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to determine, on the basis of the study of relations between Russia and the West in the post-Soviet period, the optimal vectors of development of Russian civilization identity primarily taking into account geopolitical transformations of the modern world.

5. Research Methods

The most important theoretical and methodological basis for the paper is the concept of "clash (conflict) of civilizations" (Huntington, 1993), which is known to put forward the conflict between cultures and civilizations as a key conflict of modern times, rather than between ideologies, as was the case in the cold war era. Huntington argued that civilizational identity would become increasingly important in the future, and the conflict among civilizations would displace ideological and other forms of conflict and become the dominant form of the global conflict; international relations, in which the West has historically played a key role, will increasingly depend on the position of non-Western civilizations, which have become genuine actors and have ceased to be mere targets of geopolitics.

In our interpretation, the conflict of civilizations is a megaconflict of modern times, within which cultural and axiological components are determinative. In this conflict, civilization appears to be a combination of historically selected fundamental ideas, principles, and ideals. The methodology of the "conflict of civilizations" implies the primacy of cultural value-based determinism of the world, including geopolitical tensions at the global and regional levels. In this regard, it competes with realistic approaches that highlight political and economic interests as causes of conflict. In a valid geopolitical process, the

value and “realistic” determinants are intertwined, sometimes so closely that it is difficult to analytically favor a particular group of causes. At the same time, at least at the level of discourse, there is an increase in the “axiological degree” of intercivilizational confrontation, which increases the role of the concept of “conflict of civilizations” as a paradigm for explaining global and regional contradictions.

Another important methodological approach is the concept of paradigm conflict (Avksentev & Popov, 2009), which can be defined as a conflict between social (and individual) actors, the core of which is a certain sustained and insufficiently rationalized perception of reality. The concept of paradigm conflict allows the researcher applying the overly general and metaphysical concept of the conflict of civilizations to the analysis of the real political process.

6. Findings

Complex geopolitical processes of modern times, in which Russia is fully involved, require new explanatory models and paradigms. Meanwhile, modern Russian science and public thought are still dominated by the ideas of Eurasianism revived in the form of neo-Eurasianism (Wiederkehr, 2017), in explaining the modern geopolitical situation. In the absence of serious conceptual alternatives, neo-Eurasianism can well be seen as an acceptable methodology used to analyze the development of Russian civilization in new geopolitical conditions naturally taking into account the filling of theoretical forms of Eurasianism with new empirical content. Despite the increased popularity of Eurasian ideas, the Russian political class rarely turns to Eurasian schemes in political rhetoric. The ideology of the Russian political class is a mixture of poorly compatible concepts. On the one hand, the discourse about the “nation-state” continues (in 2016 the idea of adopting a law on the Russian nation was even put forward). On the other hand, it is widely believed that the phenomenon of the nation-state is obsolete and should be replaced by the idea of Russian civilization, which is gaining increasing support in the Russian society. However, it should be noted that the discourse about Russian civilization is still poorly conceptualized and, moreover, has many opponents, especially among liberal-oriented intellectuals. Among these and many other ideas, concepts and projects, Eurasianism is only one of many possible alternatives. The dominant direction in Russia’s modern political philosophy is the contradictory civilizational search, in which neo-Eurasianism plays an important but not exclusive role. Today, the ideas of Eurasianism, which have always been mainly geostrategic and philosophical in nature, are rethinking Russia’s modern strategy in terms of rational cooperation (Bordachev, 2018).

Yet since the collapse of the Soviet Union the radical change in Russia’s civilizational and geopolitical status has modernized some important aspects of Eurasian ideology: global universal ambitions that identified the Soviet Union with the Eurasian continent were replaced by the discourse about the uniqueness and locality of Russian civilization; claims to Eurasian space were limited by the very fact of Russia’s Euro-Asian location enclosed in its current state borders. Such metamorphosis led to the understanding of Russia as a special sociocultural and civilizational system with its own special path of development. Russia’s geographical location and related geopolitical status are the main challenges to modern Russian civilization. The Russian civilization space has been formed for centuries and had various historical modifications. This space was partly lost as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it is now a source of both new historical opportunities and significant risks and threats.

It is in the post-Soviet space that today there are the most significant geopolitical tensions for Russia (and not only for Russia). In fact, Russia has three possibilities with regard to the post-Soviet space: reintegration connected with attempts to restore something resembling an empire within borders more or less corresponding to the borders of the Tsarist Russia or the USSR; total rejection of such attempts; and the third way is to find a balance between the previous options. Although the reunification of Crimea with Russia is more in favor of the first option, in reality it is the third option that is now taking place. In any case, Russia's historical mission has always been and will be interpreted in the context of political, cultural and economic construction of the territory, which is today defined as the "post-Soviet space". From the point of view of geopolitics, it is the Eurasian space.

Russia's attempts to gain its civilizational identity in the 1990s as part of the western civilizational project failed, and while this fact is important, it is not crucial to further understanding the situation. The main thing is that the West has refused to recognize Russia as part of itself, and it is not so much geopolitical but rather cultural and historical reality. Although Russia was an important participant in the system of European states and contributed to the functionality of institutions such as international law, diplomacy and the balance of power, it has always been marginal to the European community. This trend intensified after the October Revolution of 1917 and continued until the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the socialist regime (Stivachtis, 2015).

Russia took large-scale steps to join the Western world, but was simply not allowed into the world. As a result, positive identification with Europe, which dominated Russia in the 1990s, was replaced by distance and reversal towards the East. Although about two-thirds of Russians thought their country should seek to become a member of the EU in the late 1990s, that share fell below 25 % after V.V. Putin's re-election in 2012. Thus, 59 % of Russians do not consider Russia a European country, while only 17 % believe that Russia should develop along the same trajectory as Europe. These are bare facts and sobering statistics (Paparella, 2017).

The disappointment of many Russian citizens in the prospects for European integration is a consequence of persistent unwillingness of the West to recognize Russia as a full-fledged strategic partner. The switch to Asia, which is likely to be considered not just a tactical maneuver, but a long-term strategic project, is Russia's response to its lack of recognition as an important global power and partner of the West (Tsygankov, 2012). Today's at least cautious attitude of Europe towards Russia has deep historical roots. Since the Renaissance, a distant, obscure Russia has been presented to the European citizen as a source of dangers and threats, as a wild and even barbaric country. For example, the image of Russia as a giant octopus, covering "small" Europe with its tentacles, received a great spread in the cartoon genre. The mainstreaming of this image, like others of the same kind, falls within times of enhanced political tension, when Russia is viewed primarily by the West as a source of military threat, and most importantly as a power alien to Western civilization, as a revisionist and expansionist country (Bugajski, 2016).

It seems that the situation of acute crisis in Russian-Western relations does not benefit either side. It is obvious that these relations will be normalized as a whole over time, but they will be purely pragmatic, far from the talk of cultural and civilizational proximity between Russia and the West, which was typical in the last decade of the last century, not only in Russia itself, but also in some countries of

Western Europe and even in the United States. From a geopolitical point of view, this means the final collapse of the project of the united Europe – from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

This is the geopolitical aspect of Russia's modern stage of development, which determines the formation of its civilizational identity. The definition of this macro-identity is not so much related to the traditional alternative between the West and the non-West, essentially overcome by Japan, but to two global and competing integration projects – Euro-Atlanticism and Eurasianism, which actually return us to the categories of classical geopolitics. Today the prospects for Russia's civilization development are related to the success of the Eurasian project, which includes a significant part of the territories of the former Soviet Union, as well as important economic partners from the Asian region. In Western scientific literature, this project is identified as the Russian hegemonic project in the post-Soviet space (Kirkham, 2016), although in fact Russia, at least to date, has not so much a political but rather geopolitical and especially an economic interest within the framework of the Eurasian integration project. It should be understood that the post-Soviet space, for many historical reasons, will always have special importance for Russia. For this reason, Russia's increasing activity in the region is natural and does not necessarily involve clear political projections, especially in the form of the renewal of a regional empire.

Nevertheless, the West perceives Russia's activity in the post-Soviet space as an attempt to restore the USSR. The crisis in Ukraine that erupted in 2014 was largely a consequence of this Western position and effectively put Russia once again before a civilizational choice, although the prerequisites for an "Eastern" geopolitical orientation were formed before the Ukrainian events. In the Russian establishment, the Maidan is clearly seen as a Western-provoked attempt to break Ukraine from Russia, make it a NATO outpost near Russian borders in full compliance with Brzezinski's (2016) geopolitical recommendations. As a result, Russia's geopolitical vector has finalized and led to a clearer reorientation of Russia's geopolitical vision to the East and, most importantly, to Eurasia (Linde, 2016; Svarin, 2016). With this geopolitical solitaire, the notion of Russia as a unique Eurasian civilization, emphasizing its own identity as a way of cultural and civilizational distance from Western civilization, always positioned by Russian politicians and thinkers as the most significant Other, is once again coming to life. In this regard, Western science is even beginning to form the new term "civilizational nationalism", which has a negative connotation and is used to refer to these intellectual and cultural aspirations of Russian society (Aridici, 2018). At the same time, it should be noted that Russia's Eurasian choice, first, is perfectly natural to it, at least because of its geographical location, and second, such a civilizational choice does not mean that it is inevitable to deepen and exacerbate the existing conflict with the West.

7. Conclusion

The modern stage of global development with its sharply exacerbated geopolitical and sociocultural contradictions can be described as the "axial age", recalling K. Jaspers. Not only for the emerging in its renewed appearance of Russian civilization, but also for the rest of the world. Indeed, today the question of US global leadership is becoming more persistent, the less solid construction of a unipolar world is breaking down, and new global players are emerging and gaining power. In this sense, cooperation between Russia and European countries is of particular importance. The growing contradiction between national interests and the bloc obligations of many EU countries calls for the

design of a new model of relations between Europe and Russia. The need to jointly address the complex problems of modern time related to the threats of global terrorism, global migration, preservation of a viable ecosystem ultimately implies the rejection of the “axiological” model of dialogue inspired by the cold war and the transition to a pragmatic model of cooperation. If such a transition happens, both sides will benefit. It is in Russia’s interest to have constructive and mutually beneficial relations with Europe, as well as in Europe’s interest to have Russia not as a potential opponent, but as a reliable partner.

In any case, it is obvious that the civilizational identity of new Russia cannot and should not be one-sided and limited orientation only to the East or only to the West. Russia’s traditional geopolitical role as a bridge between the West and the East should continue today in a globalizing environment where all or almost all iron curtains are raised. Only the multi-vector, diverse direction of Russian civilization and its sociocultural search can ensure not only the preservation of the identity of Russian civilization, but also the geopolitical balance that is so necessary for the modern world.

Acknowledgments

The publication was prepared within the framework of the State Task of the Southern Scientific Center, RAS, Project No. AAAA-A-19-119011190170-5.

References

- Aridici, N. (2018). The Power of Civilizational Nationalism in Russian Foreign Policy Making. *Int. Politics*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-018-0159-8>
- Avksentev, V., & Popov, M. (2009). Conflicts of Identities as Security Challenge: the Conceptualization of “Paradigmatic Conflict”. *Sci. Innovat. Technol.*, 5, 141–146.
- Bordachev, T. (2018). Greater Eurasia and Russian Foreign Policy Priorities. *Asian Polit. & Policy*, 4, 597–613.
- Brzezinski, Z. (2016). *Great Chess Board. Dominance of America and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. Basic Books.
- Bugajski, J. (2016). Only NATO Can Defend Europe. *European View*, 1, 27–35.
- Freudenstein, R. (2014). Facing up to the Bear: Confronting Putin’s Russia. *European View*, 2, 225–232.
- Huntington, S. (1993). The Clash of the Civilizations? *Foreign affairs*, 72(3), 22–49.
- Kirkham, K. (2016). The Formation of the Eurasian Economic Union: How Successful is the Russian Regional Hegemony? *J. of Eurasian Studies*, 2, 111–128.
- Linde, F. (2016). The Civilizational Turn in Russian Political Discourse: From Pan-Europeanism to Civilizational Distinctiveness. *The Russ. Rev.*, 4, 604–625.
- Maslovskiy, M. (2018). Russia against Europe: a Clash of Interpretations of Modernity? *European Journal of Social Theory*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431018768623>
- Neumann, I. (2016). Russia’s Europe, 1991–2016: Inferiority to Superiority. *Int. Affairs*, 6, 1381–1399.
- Orenstein, M. (2015). Geopolitics of a Divided Europe. *East Europ. Polit. and Societies*, 2, 531–540.
- Pandey, S. (2017). Asia in the Debate on Russian Identity. *Int. Studies*, 4, 317–337.
- Paparella, E. (2017). The Stubborn Facts on Eurocentrism and the Russian National Identity Discourse. *Modern Diplomacy*.
http://moderndiplomacy.eu/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=2530:the-stubborn-facts-on-eurocentrism-and-the-russian-national-identity-discourse&Itemid=132/
- Stivachtis, Y. (2015). Liberal Democracy, Market Economy, and International Conduct as Standards of ‘Civilization’ in Contemporary International Society: The Case of Russia’s Entry into the ‘Community of Civilized States’. *J. of Eurasian Studies*, 2, 130–142.
- Svarin, D. (2016). The Construction of ‘Geopolitical Spaces’ in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse before and after the Ukraine Crisis. *J. of Eurasian Studies*, 2, 129–140.
- Tsygankov, A. (2012). The Heartland No More: Russia’s Weakness and Eurasia’s Meltdown. *J. of Eurasian Studies*, 1, 1–9.
- Wiederkehr, S. (2017). “Conservative Revolution” à la russe? An Interpretation of Classic Eurasianism in a European Context. *J. of Modern Europ. Hist.*, 1, 72–84.