

**NININS 2020****International Scientific Forum «National Interest, National Identity and National Security»****“RUSSIAN ISSUE”: A NEW EMPIRE OR A “NORMAL” STATE?**

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**Abstract**

The article aims to analyze the existing discussion regarding the issue of the future development prospects of the so-called “Russian issue”. Two diametrically opposed judgments can be found in the recent analysis of the essence of the “Russian issue”, that determine the ideological and identification codes of this state. There are many supporters of both of these concepts in Russian society and among the representatives of power in Russia. One judgment can conditionally be called “a new imperial project,” the second is the return of Russia to the pan-European civilizational path of development. These projects set different vectors of the foreign and domestic policy of the Russian state and the development of Russian society, determine the choice of strategies, allies and means of implementing the tasks. It should be noted that the issue of identification is directly related to the problem of national security, and the choice will largely be determined by which of the two indicated projects will guarantee Russia the highest level of security in the future.

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## 1. Introduction

Solovyev and Berdyaev wrote about the “Russian idea” and the “Russian project” as an imperial one, called and able to streamline not only its own national interests, but also integrate the national interests of other countries (Berdyaev, 2002; Soloviev, 1989). In the most dramatic years of modern Russian history (1990s), Russian thinkers saw the meaning of the “Russian idea” primarily as a kind of appeal “for the national revival and preservation of the material and spiritual revival of Russia”, (Gulyga, 2003, p. 291), then in 2000 and especially in the 2010s. They appealed to restore the former status of a great power and the return of Russia to the number of active geopolitical players. Strengthening the military-political power of Russia caused a wave of Russophobia, with calls to prevent the "restoration" of the Russian imperial project. The project of the “Russian world” itself has no legal definition and is based on cultural, civilizational, geopolitical and religious integration approaches (Aleinikova, 2017). But the very phrase “Russian world” itself makes all Russophobes insane, leading them into indescribable horror (Chiesa, 2016).

## 2. Problem Statement

With the change in the 2010s, the Russia's role in the international arena, its geopolitical goals and objectives also changed. The very attitude towards the existing world order also changed. Western politicians accuse Moscow of trying to destroy their world. “In the international arena, Russia today is undoubtedly a revisionist power” (Lukin & Oznobishchev, 2018, p. 181). But its revision of the international system of relations is connected with the fact that the previous canons are outdated and need modernization. The turn of Russia towards independent foreign policy led it to a conflict with the collective West, which accounted for actions such as a threat to their system of international order (Krikovich, 2019).

There are two approaches to understanding of the essence of the so-called “Russian issue” in the modern scientific literature: 1) a radical nationalist discourse about a “divided people” that does not have a significant impact on the specific policies of the modern Russian state; and 2) the moderate concepts of “diasporas” and the “Russian world” and a sluggish state policy towards its compatriots. Both of these approaches can also be characterized as an “ethno-national” and “supranational” project. In addition to the geopolitical plan, one can also talk about the existence of two projects on the prospects for the development of Russia – a patriotic plan and a liberal one. The first plan is sometimes referred to as the “new imperial project,” the second is Russia’s return to the pan-European civilizational path of the development. Each of these projects have as many supporters as the opponents, and its own well-thought-out system of evidence and rebuttal. The question is how adequate these projects are and how much they reflect the political realities in which Russia is today.

## 3. Research Questions

Russian analysts note that:

For Russia, the desire to build a national state on the ruins of an empire would inevitably mean a challenge to its federal structure, including a number of ethno-territorial units, and would call into

question its external borders, which are based on artificial administrative separation, carried out in due time by the Bolsheviks ... such an attempt could easily undermine the entire system of regional and global security (Zevelev, 2019, p. 114).

But the new empire cannot be created from the ruins of the previous empire – the conditions under which the previous imperial projects existed have changed. In addition, the new global trends make many of the features that were mandatory for the empires of earlier times unnecessary. It is enough to dominate the leading sectors (economy, culture, politics) to meet the requirements of the empire, i.e., put in your dependence those who need your high-quality achievements (technologies).

The collective West is sure that Russia will only cease to be a source of threat to the whole world and to itself when it has become a “normal” European national state. For this, Russia must abandon its imperial ambitions and choose an alternative to peaceful national statehood. In other words, the collective West wants Russia to become like them all. To this end, they put forward the Russophobic thesis that “mighty Russia” is a myth, a geopolitical fake, and that it must break up into smaller states in order to become like all of them. Moreover, these advisers do not take into account the Russia’s centuries-old experience in building the Russian state. They do not understand that it is foolish to demand from Russia to repeat their own experience with Western countries. These two experiences are different and therefore unacceptable in essence for reuse in other (foreign) political environments.

Moreover, what is the “norm” for the collective West is an anomaly for Russia. If Russia had adopted the European “norm” at one time, then it would not have been able to resist the imperial ambitions of the “collective” West (Napoleon, Hitler). “To be like the West” for Russia means to be dependent on the West. Such dependency threatens with a loss of sovereignty and a decrease in the level of security. One of the constructivism founders Wendt noted that the positive influence of the growth of interdependence on the formation of collective identity is due to the fact that “the level of dependence of any kind determines how much the identity of the dependent subject is formed by those on whom he depends” (Wendt, 1994, p. 28).

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this work is to analyze the existing discussion regarding the issue of the future development prospects of the so-called “Russian issue”. As a working hypothesis, we can put forward the assumption that the current discussion on this issue consists in substantiating the choice between the new imperial project of a strong state (superpower) and the creation of a “democratic” political regime that is “normal” from the point of view of the canons of Western liberal ideology. There are many supporters of both of these concepts in Russian society and among the representatives of power in Russia. It is actually about who we are – what Russia should be in the 21st century, with whom it should build partnerships, and where to expect real threats and conflicts.

#### **5. Research Methods**

To solve the problem posed by the authors, the basic complex of methods (dialectics + hermeneutics + comparative studies), as well as the principles of historicism, personalism and semiotics

were used in the given article. The indicated methods make it possible to reveal the content of the meanings of the theoretical directions under consideration, to conduct a comparative analysis of their texts and to identify their strong and weak positions in the “pro et contra” mode. An analysis of the existing discourse is conducted from the standpoint of elitological science (theory of elites), since it is representatives of political and scientific elites who are most often involved in this problem. The theoretical construction is based on well-known philosophical works on this issue (Soloviev, Berdyaev), as well as on the modern Russian geopolitical school (Panarin, Primakov), which repeatedly touched on the theme of national identity and a strategy for Russia's behavior in the new international environment.

## 6. Findings

Since the mid-1980s, Russia is actively seeking a new identity. The Soviet project showed its failure resulting in the collapse of the USSR. In Russia, they understand that the search for their identity must take into account both historical and cultural traditions, as well as a clear understanding of the features of the 21st century and the international context. This context is dictated to everyone by completely new conditions for the existence of the imperial project, if such is possible.

In recent decades, two frontal phenomena have greatly influenced the process of civilizational self-determination of Russia – the expansion of NATO into the East and the attempt of civilizational self-determination of Ukraine. In the context of the ongoing struggle for Ukraine, the Russian side discovered the scarcity of its geopolitical and geocultural conceptual arsenal. Russian experts state that at present “Russia clearly showed a deficit in its own identity policy” (Mezhuev, 2019). But we find a similar deficit in many modern political regimes, including the Anglo-Saxon ones. For the latter, this deficit is associated with the loss of the role of a global leader and a global “peace keeper”. “Shining city on the hill” begins to fade and decay. Imperial gilding is rapidly crumbling from it and rebranding is an unsuccessful restoration of non-viable fragments of its structure.

Trying to “self-determine”, Russian liberals argue that there are no contradictions between Russia and the collective West and that they are “natural allies”.

Our real situation clearly shows: we are no longer a superpower, the world communist gendarme. But we are and will always remain a great regional Eurasian power. The power on which the stability of the entire Eurasian continent depends. Let us now briefly go over our borders (Gaidar, 2013, p. 38).

The “evangelists of neoliberalism” led their theory into a complete ideological impasse. Now they are trying to draw Russia into it as well.

In this regard, speaking of identity, it would be logical to assume that it can be both “imperial” and “non-imperial”. Everything depends on which project of further development Russia, its public, its elites will choose. At the same time, the game of democratic or authoritarian definitions does not play any significance. We know that empires can also be adherents of democracy, republicanism and liberalism. Therefore, it is not so much about the form, but about the content of these projects.

Under the current conditions, imperialism can act as a kind of antidote against nationalism, since (in the Russian case this is especially evident) it is a powerful barrier to usurping any one nation of power in the state, claiming the imperial status. Much of this choice depends on which of the above projects in the future will guarantee more reliable security conditions. Multinational Russia always faces the threat of

intensified nationalism of particular peoples and increased ethnic hatred. The imperial project, on the contrary, involves involving various national elites in this global project, in which everyone is equal.

Western partners of Russia are dreaming to see it as a “normal” state, i.e. to be like everyone (to be like everyone today means to be faceless and powerless). For Russia, the norm is just an empire, not a national state. Depriving Russia of imperial status will develop in it the monstrous spirit of nationalism and chauvinism. The first to apply nationalism will be the counter-elites, for whom it will be a convenient chance for a violent (undemocratic) rise to power.

National interests reflect specific legal and political standards through media and communication practices and public relations that determine the identity of a particular state. The main issue has always been, is and remains in the future the issue of national security. The extent to which political elites resolve this issue depends on the public support they provide. In the last thesis, we touch upon another topic that is painful for modern Russia – the measure of the development of democratic institutions. It is not a question of whether there is democracy in Russia or not. It is about how much society itself is interested in developing democratic institutions and how much the ruling political elites provide it with democratic guarantees.

## **7. Conclusion**

Speaking about the national identity of Russians and their cultural identity, we should always pay attention to the multicultural space of the context of its historical development. The religious factor plays its role in the formation of national consciousness. Unlike the collective West, traditional religions in Russia have deep historical roots and still affect politics, culture, and social relations. The issue of identity often depends on the issue which particular denomination this or that group of persons belongs to.

We draw attention to the fact that the famous Russian politician and academic academician Primakov describes the role of Russia in the international arena as a dying empire, which is still being feared, but which cannot do anything itself (Primakov, 2016a; Primakov, 2016b). It is the so-called “wild nineties” that his political career took off. He, as an expert, perfectly understood that a weak Russia was pulling along the geopolitical bottom of other countries that were interested in the alliance with it. Primakov perfectly understood that it is necessary to maintain a balance of forces in the international relations, which is possible only if there are several strong and self-sufficient players on the world map. Therefore, a multipolar world is the key to balance and tranquility even in the hottest places in the world. As one of these poles he saw a resurgent Russia.

Authorities must control all the development goals of their state. Its sovereignty and national security largely depend on this. If the authorities (elites) stop doing this the more powerful geopolitical players will begin to do it for them soon. Russia overcame the threat of losing its national sovereignty three times (the first time during foreign intervention during the civil war, the second time during the Great Patriotic War and the third time in the “dashing nineties”) in the twentieth century. During this time, France only once experienced the complete collapse of its national project, the United States – not a single one, and Germany has been under the external control of the Anglo-Saxons for more than 70 years, while pretending not to notice their military-political presence. Russia simply cannot afford such a thing.

The conflict with the West shook the scales in the direction of strengthening the independence of Russia and the previously existing alternative, the new empire or the “normal” state government began to lose its balance in favor of the former. Russia simply cannot afford to be weak. The degree of its survival depends on how successfully it copes with the challenges of modern times. It is impossible to control such vast geographical spaces without an appropriate geopolitical strategy and high scientific technologies. Therefore, Russia has taken the path of strengthening its military-political potential. With its Russophobic hysteria, the collective West itself put Russia among those who ceased to trust it. The West will have to make a lot of efforts in order to regain the trust lost by Russia.

The problem of political institutional identity is faced not only by Russia, but also by a number of leading countries that have found themselves in a situation of transition from late industrialism to early post-industrialism. For example, in the United States in recent decades, the issue of the identity of the institution of presidential power, which is experiencing serious functional problems, has become an acute issue (Travkina, 2019). Similar problems are found in many countries where there is a serious need for reforming political systems.

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