

**AMURCON 2020**  
**International Scientific Conference**

**CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY: THE  
GEOGRAPHY OF FEDERAL ASSEMBLY ADDRESSE**

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**Abstract**

The goal of this study is to research mapping the geopolitics of Russia on the basis of the Presidential addresses (Addresses) to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation for the period 2011-2016. The study reveals changes in Russian geopolitics in 2011-2016, and establishes the relationship between the civilizational identity of the Russian Federation and its participation in integration processes, both in the Eurasian space and on a global scale. The objects of the formal analysis of documents were the Addresses of the President of the Russian Federation to the Federal Assembly for the 2011-2016 period. The research was conducted on the basis of the traditional method of document analysis, quantitative corpus-based content analysis of the Addresses in 2011-2016, and analysis of the event series. The subject areas of the study were integration and identity (the main directions of Russian regional policy). The authors concluded that the Addresses can provide data for establishing the changes and shifts of Russian geopolitics, that are analyzed in-depth for the period of 2011-2016, and play an important role in constructing the perception of Russian civilizational identity. The results of the study clearly show, that while the domestic issues clearly dominate in the 2011-2016 Addresses, the foreign policy is addressed consistently, and within the period in question Russia's number one priority in international matters remains the same: strengthening cooperation within the framework of the Eurasian space.

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*Keywords:* Critical geopolitics, Russia, identity, foreign policy, integration, corpus-based content analysis



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## 1. Introduction

In accordance with the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the President of Russia determines the main objectives of domestic and foreign policy of the Russian Federation (Konstitutsiya rossiyskoy federatsii, 1993), directs the foreign policy Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki rossiyskoy federatsii, 2013) and sets the foreign policy guidelines (Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki rossiyskoy federatsii, 2016). Annual Presidential addresses to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation [Addresses] reflect the President's views “on the situation in the country and on the basic objectives of the internal and foreign policy of the State” (Konstitutsiya rossiyskoy federatsii, 1993, p. 84).

The Addresses that took place between 2011 and 2016 reflect Russia's desire to project a strong and independent state, to declare that national interests are at the basis of its foreign policy, and that unbroken historical continuity determines its foreign policy identity. All the Addresses during this period touch upon the main areas of domestic and foreign policy, integration, identity, security threats, and geopolitical goals. The purpose of this study is to determine the priorities of Russia's foreign policy throughout the period in question, the shifts and slight changes of these priorities, the causes for them and the links between different factors, for which in-depth analysis of the source material is required.

## 2. Problem Statement

Among modern (nonclassical) theories and schools of international relations and world politics (the basis for this research) is a school of critical geopolitics (Bachmann & Moisiu, 2020; O'Tuathail, 1999).

Critical geopolitics link the process of making foreign policy decisions with spatial myth-making, cognitive maps, creation and reproduction by the elite and individual social strata or professional groups, professors, experts, journalists, etc., of spatial imagination (Omelicheva, 2016).

These ideas coincide with Social Identity Theory, a direction within the framework of constructivism, focused on the problem of recognition of status, search for status, and competitions between states for status (Larson & Shevchenko, 2003; Mercer, 1995; Volgy & Mayhall, 1995). Constructivism argues that core aspects of international relations are socially constructed, i.e. they are given their form by ongoing processes of social practice and interaction.

The constructivism approach was successfully applied by Hopf (2002) to the analysis of the category of identity, in the context of both the social construction of the foreign policy of the USSR and Russia in the second half of the 20th century, and, more broadly, of international politics in general. Neumann (1999) also successfully used the constructivist method of analysis to (re)create the perception of Russia from the point of view of the West. Neumann actively uses the notion of "collective identity" for understanding how different images of the “other” are formed in different spheres of world politics through discourse. Our discussion will follow his understanding of “collective identity” to analyze the Presidential addresses of 2011-2016 as part of the political discourse.

### **3. Research Questions**

In order to better understanding the role that Presidential addresses play in Russian foreign policy, we are to first: 1. Identify changes in Russian geopolitics in 2011-2016; and 2. Establish a link between the civilizational identity of the Russian Federation and its participation in the integration process. The data for the formal analysis is contained in the Presidential addresses to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation from 2011 to 2016. The source for the texts of these Addresses is the official website of the President of the Russian Federation [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru).

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

The purpose of this study is to determine the priorities of Russia's foreign policy throughout the period in question, the shifts and slight changes of these priorities and their causes, as well as the links between different factors, for which in-depth analysis of the source material is required.

### **5. Research Methods**

The methodological basis of this study integrates a realistic research paradigm, within which critical geopolitics developed, and a constructivist paradigm of international relations theory. We share the approach of P. Kelly, who believes that a new level of assessment is needed for a comparative analysis: one that objectively compares two trends (traditional and critical) within the framework of geopolitics (Kelly, 2006).

This study uses the following methods: traditional method of document analysis (content analysis of the document and context analysis), corpus-based quantitative content analysis, and event series analysis. For the corpus-based quantitative content analysis was prepared the "Presidential addresses to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation 2011-2016" (PAFARF\_11-16) corpus, with each Address as a subdivision of the Corpus.

### **6. Findings**

One of the foundations for the emergence of the Russian state, which may embody the concept of "Russian civilization," was that for centuries, the country's political elite considered territory as expanding space (Katzenstein, 2017; Kolosov & Sebentsov, 2020; Tsygankov, 2016; Zeleneva & Ageeva, 2018). The supranational Russian superethnos was formed and further developed on the foundation of the Russian state. Compared to European nations and Afro-Asian ethnic and religious communities, it was unique because throughout its development the role of the space-territorial factor was of paramount importance, dominating socio-economic, spiritual, religious, and national factors. Modern Russia is a unique community. On one hand, Russia can be regarded as a one-nation state, as more than four-fifths of the population are ethnic Russians. On the other hand, Russia consists of more than a hundred different ethnic groups.

Despite significant differences, the formation of the Russian identity in the early 21st century appeared to go in the direction of rapprochement with European cultural identity, as Russia's acquaintance with Europe has very deep roots.

The main feature of the Russian geocultural potential is the borderline nature of Russian civilization. Russia is not located within any one civilization, but at the intersection of several civilizations, in particular Christian and Islamic. The geocultural strategy of Russia should not be aimed at inclusion into any one geocultural space, since this can lead to the emergence of conflicts within Russia itself. No ideology aimed at establishing one dominant ethnic group or religion can be accepted as a strategy for sustainable development of Russia. As if summing up an intermediate result of reflections on the fate of Russian civilization, in 2012 President Vladimir Putin (2012) wrote in the article "Russia: the national question" about the essence of civilization, about its code.

Russia emerged and for centuries developed as a multinational state. The state in which the process of mutual adaptation, mutual pervasion, mixing of people on a family, on friendly, on an official level was constantly present ... Such a civilizational identity is based on the preservation of the Russian cultural dominant, which is supported not only by ethnic Russians, but also by all the carriers of such identity regardless of nationality. This is the cultural code that has undergone in recent years serious trials, that there have been and still are being made attempts to crack. And, nevertheless, it certainly remains. At the same time, it must be nurtured, strengthened and protected.

Speaking of identity, in the 2015 Address, Putin quoted the words of D. Mendeleev, spoken more than a hundred years ago, but extremely relevant today: "Divided, we will be immediately destroyed. Our strength is in unity, in the army, in benign family life, multiplying the growth of the people, and in the natural growth of our inner wealth and peace"(Poslaniye..., 2015). The cultural code of Russia, indicated in the Address and in the Putin's words, is therefore, a multi-ethnic state, a force in unity, family and spiritual values, in which not the least valuable is Orthodoxy.

The 2012 Address attracted attention due to the increase in the number of references to "Russia." Compared to the 2011 Addresses, "Russia" was mentioned in various contexts more than 50 times in 2012, 59 times in 2014, and 30 times in 2015. The question "what is Russia?"—which was a concern for political elite for centuries, as we've established earlier—once again became relevant, primarily because of the Russian dilemma, where to move: to the West or to the East. The answer to this question, interwoven into ongoing processes of social practice and interaction, but guided by the opinions and views of the state's leaders, expressed in their public speeches (the annual form of which is Presidential address) is also part of Russia's civilizational code, its identity.

The processes of regional integration, taking place nowadays all around the world, are particularly relevant to Russia and its unique geopolitical role; they transform the model of the traditional national state, creating favorable conditions for the formation of a macroregional identity. The 2011-2016 Addresses allow us to observe, how the macroregional identity is formed, what circumstances affect it. The 2012 Address states: "The interest in integration is growing in America (both North and South America), in Europe, and in Asia, and these processes are gaining momentum" (Poslaniye..., 2012).

But despite the deep-rooted ties to European states, the pattern of breaking from Europe, that began in 2006, as observed by Ambrosio (2013) continued in the later Addresses, and as we have established in

the previous section, Russian priority in the 2012 Address is clearly the integration within the Eurasian space (Poslaniye..., 2012):

We will move towards closer integration. This is exemplified by the [Eurasian] Customs Union and the Common Economic Space of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, which are already functioning effectively. We have begun to establish the Eurasian Economic Union, and naturally we will continue to work at this and achieve this goal.

The significance of this region can be traced back to an analysis of the references to international organizations in the Eurasian space that were created with the direct participation of Russia. Organizations within the Eurasian space (CIS, EAEU, EACU, CSTO, and SCO) account for 55% of all references. Frequent reference to the Eurasian economic community is connected with the transition of this community to the second integration stage — the formation of the Single Economic Space of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC, or EAEU since 2015). In addition, it should be noted that five EurAsEC member states—Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan—are also members of the CIS. In most cases, references to CIS states in the Addresses were related to activities of the Eurasian Economic Community (and later EAEU).

In the 2012 Address (Poslaniye..., 2012) we also observe the increasing significance of Asia-Pacific integration, thus bringing to the fore the Eastern vector, which is seen as having valuable growth potential:

In the 21st century, the vector of Russia's development will be the development of the East. Siberia and the Far East represent our enormous potential ... And now we must realise our potential. We have the opportunity to assume a worthy place in the Asia-Pacific region, the most dynamic region in the world.

The political events of 2014, leading to the imposition of sanctions on Russia, made the “turn to the East”, towards the Asia-Pacific region, even more prominent in the Addresses; and even if the West is still mentioned, its role is obviously downplayed (Poslaniye..., 2014):

Our goal is to have as many equal partners as possible, both in the West and in the East. We will expand our presence in those regions where integration is on the rise, where politics is not mixed with economy, and where obstacles to trade, to exchange of technology and investment and to the free movement of people are lifted... We see how quickly Asia Pacific has been developing over the past few decades. As a Pacific power, Russia will use this huge potential comprehensively.

The World Trade Organization [WTO] is mentioned twice in the 2011 Addresses, in reference to the accession of Russia to this organization. References to the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation [SCO] appear consistently in the 2011, 2013, 2016 Addresses, illustrating the sustained interest in further cooperation. Both the SCO and Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] are mentioned in the context of the prospect of forming an economic partnership with the EAEU. It should be noted that references to international economic organizations (WTO, BRICS, EAEU) are generally more frequent than references to military alliances (Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO], SCO). NATO, that accounted for 19,3% of all references in the 2000-2010 Addresses (Ambrosio, 2013), and OSCE are not mentioned in the 2011-2016 Addresses at all, which clearly shows the shift of Russian geopolitical interests in the last decade.

The will to establish the Eurasian Economic Union, to further integration within the post-Soviet space, expressed in the 2012 Address, is close to being realized in the end of 2014, and the Address

emphasizes the fundamental principles of “strong cooperation” within the Union, among which “national identity” is on the most important: “The topmost principles are equality, pragmatism and mutual respect, as well as the preservation of national identity and state sovereignty of its member countries” (Poslaniye..., 2014).

In the 2016 Address there is a plethora of foreign policy statements (Poslaniye..., 2016):

Further strengthening cooperation within the Eurasian Economic Union and with other CIS countries has always been a foreign policy priority for Russia.

Russia attaches great importance to the idea of building a multi-level integration model for Eurasia in the form of a Greater Eurasian Partnership. ... I am confident that we can have conversation with the European Union countries, where the demand for political and economic independence is currently on the rise.

There is great potential for Russia in terms of cooperation with the Asia-Pacific region, as we saw at this year’s Eastern Economic Forum. I ask the Government to make sure that all decisions regarding the development of the Russian Far East are implemented without exception. Let me reiterate that Russia is proactive in its Eastern policy not because of any momentary considerations we may have, not because of the cooling in relations with the United States or the European Union, but for the reason that it serves Russia’s long-term interests and is consistent with the global development trends.

Russia is also ready to work with the new US Administration.

Thus, the 2016 Address present the new perception of integration, that might once again alter Russia geopolitical codes and influence Russian civilizational identity. The convergence of large spaces and SCO integration projects may contribute to the formation of the ASEAN Economic Partnership; connecting large spaces, the European Union, the Eurasian Economic Union, China, India, Japan, and ASEAN countries can lead to full integration of the entire Eurasian space and to the formation of a Greater Eurasian Partnership (Alimov, 2018; Bordachev, 2018; Garmash, 2017; Laruelle, 2015; Novikov & Shumkova, 2018). Whether this vision can indeed be realized in the future remains to be seen, but it is definitely present in the cognitive map of the Russian president at this point.

## **7. Conclusion**

Based on the six Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation (2011-2016) we made an attempt to assess the role Russia strives to plays in the world and to trace, whether the changes of geopolitical interests coincide with shifts in the perception of national identity.

The results of the study clearly show, that while the domestic issues clearly dominate in the 2011-2016 Addresses, the foreign policy is addressed consistently, and within the period in question Russia's number one priority in international matters remains the same: strengthening cooperation within the framework of the Eurasian space. The statements of the 2011-2015 Addresses tend to emphasize the significance of Russia's integration and cooperation with such organizations as EAEU, CIS, CSTO, and SCO, while the 2016 Address goes further, and aims to further the ideas of building a multi-level integration model for Eurasia, a Greater Eurasian Partnership.

The once important vector of foreign policy, the European one, according to our study, in 2011-2016 recedes into the background. The situation around Ukraine significantly affected political and

economic relations with Europe. The role of the West, specifically the United States in the chess game in the Eurasian space is noted as negative, and while Europe is still regarded as a neighbor and partner, the Asia-Pacific vector is presented as more significant. However, this is dictated not by the cooling of relations with the West, but by national interests (further development of Siberia and the Far East) and long-term development prospects, thus emphasizing the significance of national interests in preserving Russian civilizational identity, as well as adding the notion of Russia as a “Pacific power” to the discursive construct of Russian identity.

China and other Asia-Pacific countries are introduced into the 2011-2016 discourse as members of many international organizations that are important to Russia and are consistently referenced in the Addresses: the SCO, BRICS, etc.; India and China, in particular, are presented as valued strategic partners. Despite the high importance of the European vector in earlier period, in the latest Addresses the integration with these particular countries is presented as a second priority after the Eurasian space integration, and the foreign policy section of the 2016 Address is focused on the, perhaps, debatable, but strongly emphasized by the Russian leaders notion, that only by linking such large areas as the European Union, the Eurasian Economic Union, China, India, Japan, and ASEAN countries the true integration throughout the Eurasian space may be achieved through the Greater Eurasian Partnership, thus adding one more focus for the perception of Russian geopolitics, as it is presented by the cognitive maps of Russian Presidents in 2011-2016.

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