

Irreplaceable Russia: Fortresses and Bridges of the “Russian Idea”

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Abstract

The essay discusses Russia’s mission in the contemporary world, as expressed in the concept of the “Russian Idea.” Some Russian thinkers view the country as a fortress defending itself (and the world) from alien—primarily Western—civilizations. Others associate the “Russian Idea” with a bridge connecting different nations and civilizations. The question of whether Russia should be focused primarily on protecting national foundations and geopolitical boundaries or propose an ambitious, transformative agenda has important practical implications. The essay aims to draw attention to two sides of the concept—the nationally defensive and the one related to the dialogue of civilizations, possibly connecting them with each other.

Keywords: “Russian Idea,” national mission, dialogue of civilizations, international relations theory.

“Every nation has a motherland, but only we have Russia”—this is how Georgy Fedotov phrased his understanding of national identity. Many peoples could share a subjective view that the motherland is irreplaceable. An objective contribution to world history can transform the feelings of the people into awareness of their mission, or special purpose. The deeper this awareness, the stronger the desire of the people and their elites to express not only the national-cultural, but also the universal and the global. Awareness of the universal nature of a nation’s mission and the desire to describe it as a guideline to ideological and practical activities are typical of all major nations and civilizations. Each of them is universal and irreplaceable in its own way.

What is Russia’s universal mission today as the habitual structures of the existing world order and modern society are crumbling? Should this mission be focused primarily on preserving historical foundations and geopolitical boundaries? Or, on the contrary, being aware of the dangers of further social, political, and military destabilization in the world, should we set ambitious global transformation goals? And finally, what does all this mean for the development of the Russian theory of international relations (RTIR)? Is the emerging theory suitable for solving national and global problems? Modern changes in the world can be compared in scale to those that occurred in the middle of the last century and were described in 1944 by Karl Polanyi as “the collapse of civilization.” If this is so, then no one will be able to survive alone, and talking about the multiplicity of civilizations and the preservation of their basic cultural and historical values cannot be considered sufficient. There is a need to rethink the importance of dialogue among civilizations in order to address the common challenges of survival and development.

The purpose of this essay is to draw attention to both the national-defensive side of cultural identity and to its other side related to the dialogue of civilizations, and possibly connect them with each other. Both interpretations of the original “Russian Idea” can be found in the philosophical and theoretical reflections by Russian thinkers. Understanding Russia as a fortress defending itself (and the world) from

alien—primarily Western—expansion, on the one hand, and as a bridge connecting different cultures and nations, on the other, is characteristic of Russian thought since its emergence. Both interpretations were quite influential at different times, depending on the relationship with the outside world. While not seeking to verbalize the modern mission of the Russian state-civilization, the essay briefly traces the logic of these reflections in the last two centuries. The metaphors of the fortress and the bridge describe the two sides of the “Russian Idea” that are inseparable from each other. Both sides can be found in the Russian worldview throughout its evolution. Attempts to become a fortress and reject dialogue inevitably lead to the extremes of civilizational nationalism. But focusing entirely on the bridge concept can result in the underestimation of the need to strengthen the internal foundations that are necessary for resistance to external pressure.

INDISPENSABILITY OF STATES-CIVILIZATIONS

Contemporary researchers of civilizations are divided into traditionalists and post-colonial theory proponents. For traditionalists like Samuel Huntington, civilizations are indispensable, but they are akin to fortresses with sealed cultural borders, willing to defend their values from external encroachments. According to this understanding, any civilizational idea, being a reflection of national-cultural exclusivity, cannot go beyond its own borders and is incapable of intercultural enrichment or dialogue. After all, these borders are real, ontologically natural and cannot but obstruct serious attempts at inter-civilizational cooperation. Huntington was convinced of the cross-cultural nature of modern conflicts between Catholics and Orthodox believers in Europe, between Christians and Muslims in Europe and Eurasia, between Muslims and Hindus in Asia, and between Confucian China and Protestant America on a global scale.

For the proponents of post-colonial theory, which dates back to researchers such as Edward Said, Dipesh Chakrabarty, John Hobson and others, civilizations are not separated from each other by an impenetrable wall. Their values change, and their members are able to conduct a dialogue and learn from each other. At the same time,

mutual interaction and cross-enrichment are possible only within the limits of the values established by civilizations themselves.

Civilizations are unique in terms of values, but at the same time they are not closed to interaction with and borrowing from others. For example, the prevalent idea of Western civilization is its irreplaceability stemming from the missionary conviction that the ideals of liberal democracy are universal. America, as then U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright famously said, is “an indispensable nation” because it is above others and, therefore, sees farther. At the same time, while the Western elites support expansion, some of their members advocate dialogue and strengthen their positions whenever Western ideals and opportunities start fading globally. The Western academic world is dominated by ideas that advance the universality of Western values, but outside the mainstream there are many theories that propose active interaction with non-Western cultures.

There are even more proponents of dialogue in non-Western cultures, the development of which has long been much more dependent on the West than vice versa. In this part of the world, dialogue is often proposed as a way of overcoming the hierarchical and (neo) colonial nature of the Western-centric system of international relations.

For example, gaining prominence in today’s China are not only nearly universalist ideas like the Confucian theory of Tianxia, but also ideas of international dialogue based on the understanding of local cultural traditions. Ideas of non-bloc development and wide interaction with other nations, rooted in the country’s rich intellectual history, have always been strong in India. Western and non-Western exclusivity projects alike are criticized in the Muslim world. And as an alternative, some Islamic researchers suggest relying on Sufi philosophy as the basis for building a global theory of international relations.

RUSSIA AS A FORTRESS AND RESISTANCE TO THE WEST’S EXPANSION

A significant number of Russian thinkers espouse the idea of Russia as a fortress in order to protect its own spiritual roots dating back to Byzantium, a special system of social and political relations, and

geopolitical interests. Faced with strong pressure from the West, Russian thought has often prioritized protection against the expansion of Western civilization. As Fyodor Tyutchev once wrote, Russia denies the West's future by the very fact of its own existence.

Slavophile thinkers, starting with Konstantin Aksakov, were always worried by the rise of liberal and revolutionary ideas in Europe, and insisted on protecting Russia from them. The values of Russian Orthodoxy and the Russian community were considered the only true ones and superseding values treasured by all other nations. Many Slavophiles supported the Crimean War, viewing it as the liberation of Orthodox believers in the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, the Slavophiles wanted to isolate themselves from Europe in order to strengthen Russian identity in Russia itself. Similar ideas were close to the advocates of pan-Slavism, whose theory of cultural-historical types was enunciated by Nikolai Danilevsky.

The ideas of Russian communism, seeking to fence itself off from Europe, began to develop at about the same time. Like the Slavophiles, Russian social thinkers did not want a revolution in Russia and emphasized the importance of the peasant community for the survival of the country. The ideas of peasant socialism as the basis of the Russian idea of equality, originated by Alexander Herzen, were subsequently developed by Narodniki (populists) and the theorists of Russian anarchism.

In the post-revolutionary period of the 20th century, isolationist views were voiced by those who saw in Europe the risk of spiritual, ideological, political, and socio-cultural enslavement of Russia. Ideas close to Slavophile ones were upheld by Ivan Ilyin, who struggled for the liberation of Russia from Bolshevism and against Western dominance. He linked spiritual revival with the Orthodox faith and a strong rule-of-law state. After the Second World War, similar ideas were championed by Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

The concept of fortress was furthered by the communists after the theory of world revolution had been abandoned in favor of Stalin's idea of developing socialism in a hostile capitalist environment. After World War II, the notions of independent development and "building

socialism” evolved through debates with the advocates of greater openness to Western countries.

Finally, the period of post-revolutionary weakening of Russia is associated with the emergence of the Eurasian trend in Russian thought in its isolationist version. Like Ilyin, many Eurasianists reacted extremely negatively to Bolshevik power in Russia, but at the same time they feared the European influence on the country’s development. Just like Danilevsky, Nikolai Trubetzkoy, Peter Savitsky and others regarded Russia as a special cultural-historical type, the origin of which they linked to unique geography and Turco-Mongol influences. In the post-war period, similar ideas were developed by Savitsky’s follower Lev Gumilev, who explained why Europe was “alien” and “hostile” to Russia in his own way. He created a theory of the cyclical development of nations on the basis of their own internal laws, geography and interaction with nature and the cosmos.

The idea of Russia as a fortress got a second wind after the collapse of the Soviet state and abortive attempts to integrate the country into the community of Western countries. Among Slavophiles, the ideals of the Orthodox Third Rome and opposition to Western “godlessness” were expressed most vividly by Alexander Panarin. Communists and Eurasianists often advocated the economic and political self-sufficiency of Russia within the former Soviet space. For them, the irreplaceability of Russia boiled down to denying the global expansion of the West.

RUSSIA AS A BRIDGE AND IRREPLACEABILITY OF A “WORLD OF WORLDS”

The development of Russian thought is inseparable from the desire to see internal diversity and a “world of worlds” in Russia (M. Gefter), and the ability to be a connecting element in the world and overcome various political and ideological extremes. With the sufficient openness of the outside, including Western, world, the Russians tend to learn and borrow from other cultures, converting the knowledge thus gained into their own expertise for purposes they deem important.

For example, the early Slavophiles felt a close connection with Europe and even admired it, while wishing to strengthen the Russian

Orthodox and communal principles. Alexey Khomyakov called Europe “a land of holy miracles,” urging closer integration with it, but on the spiritual and moral Orthodox grounds close to him. He was convinced that Orthodoxy contained universal truths that allowed and implied openness to the West. In the first third of the 19th century, Khomyakov, like many others, did not yet see the liberal, secular, industrial, and revolutionary transformations in the West as the main vector of its future development. He considered possible and necessary for Russia and Europe to learn from each other and rejuvenate themselves on the basis of “pure” Christianity free from the hierarchical boundaries.

But as Europe drifted away from Russia, the theories of dialogue and unity between them faded. In post-reform and pre-revolutionary times, such theories were developed by those who, like Vladimir Solovyov, sincerely believed in the strength of Russian-European ties. Russia was still an integral part of the European continent, and Solovyov, along with Russian pro-Western liberals, defended the country’s European affiliation. But, unlike the liberals, he was convinced of the need for reconciliation between the two Christian trends of the Second and Third Romes. The followers of Khomyakov and Solovyov continued to espouse the ideas of Christian closeness between Russia and Europe, but as Bolshevik power gained momentum, they had to do so outside the country.

After World War II, the idea of dialogue with the West sprang up when Stalin’s death opened up opportunities for some rapprochement between the USSR and the social democratic governments in European countries. The generation of the 1960s and 1970s had grown up criticizing Stalinism and was ready for dialogue with the West. Progressive intellectuals in the West often spoke of “convergence” or a merger between the socialist and capitalist systems to make use of their best practices. The supporters of “peaceful coexistence” between the two systems had gained a foothold within the Communist Party. Some of them shared social democratic ideas and beliefs, although they had to be careful in expressing their views. This environment spawned the future ideologue of socialist reforms, Mikhail Gorbachev. Having come to power, Gorbachev urged the Soviet Union and the West to

learn from each other and compete for the best practices, calling his book “Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World.” As a supporter of dialogue, he also expressed confidence in socialist values, believing that the integration of the world’s best achievements would occur on the basis of the concept of social equality that was close to him.

The ideas of socio-political dialogue with the West did not disappear after the collapse of Soviet power, but in many ways lost their attractiveness. At first, they were encouraged by those who, like Gorbachev, believed it possible to get the most out of liberal-capitalist globalization, while defending Russia’s interests. But those ideas had no future. Instead of continuing the dialogue, the parties kept sliding into a conflict that eventually led to the current confrontation in Ukraine. Today, Russian advocates of dialogue call for a political compromise, emphasizing the responsibility of all parties to the conflict. However, their positions within the ruling class are still weaker than those who push for the ultimate victory.

The idea of dialogue has turned out to be more suitable for discussing social, cultural, and political processes in relations between Russia and the Non-West. Eurasian ideas have prompted the creation of political and economic organizations in Greater Eurasia in order to establish a continent-wide dialogue and cooperation. Instead of common confrontation with the West, as the concept of Russia as a fortress suggested, emphasis has been placed on the search for unifying interests and the joint development of the Eurasian space. The authors of this approach believe that some European countries could gradually join in, too.

RUSSIAN IDEA AND THE FUTURE OF RTIR

The idea of Russia as a fortress defending itself (and the world) from alien—primarily Western—expansion, on the one hand, and as a bridge connecting different cultures and nations, on the other, has been part of Russian thought since its emergence and should be reflected in the contemporary Russian theory of international relations (RTIR). In terms of the IR theory, existing differences can partly be reduced to

disputes between realists and liberals. At the same time, in political disputes, the proponents of the fortress and bridge concepts have often found themselves on different sides of history. Future IR theorists should think about overcoming this dichotomy. Russian civilization is too complex to be described within the framework of just one theory.

A dialogue of civilizations, which takes into account Russia's special position as a juncture of continents, can serve as the basis for its positioning in the world. It is important that the RTIR is open to discussion and based on the understanding of both Russia's comparative advantages and the parity principles of its dialogue with influential centers of power, and cultural and civilizational influence.

Skeptics will say that increasing destabilization in the world, the growing number of wars and rising nationalism can hardly encourage dialogue today. In their opinion, any dialogue with the outside world, particularly Western countries, would be a dangerous misconception that can only weaken Russia's own cultural foundations. However, if dialogue and global interdependence are not enhanced, the above processes will lead to even greater instability and conflicts, including those involving major powers and probably nuclear weapons.

Needless to say, there can be no dialogue for the sake of dialogue and it can never succeed if it involves a stronger partner who is not inclined to make concessions. In fact, the examples of Russia's "new thinking" in the 1980s and "strategic partnership" with the West in the 1990s are quite telling and by no means inspiring. Success is possible if a dialogue is based on the objective and subjective sense of self-confidence. At the same time, internal concentration and strengthening are necessary but not sufficient conditions for overcoming a crisis threatening to erupt into a global war. Force remains an indispensable attribute of international relations, but it does not solve the problem of long-term goal-setting.¹ It is no coincidence that Western dominance in international relations is criticized today not only by post-colonialism theorists, but also by those who want to combine post-colonialism with classical realism.

¹ Tsygankov, A.P. and Tsygankov, P.A., 2022. Might Makes No Right: Realism and International Relations Theory. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 20(4), pp. 68–76. DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2022-20-1-68-76

Dialogue with the West will not be productive as long as Western countries prioritize pressure in relations with Russia. But such a situation will not last endlessly. The gradually shrinking possibility of the West to dominate the world can open up new opportunities for intercultural dialogue. The world will be rebuilt and partly is already being rebuilt on equal terms with the West. Although such notions as mutual trust and commitment to peaceful conflict settlement are absent today, they may be in demand in the medium-term future, after the conflict in Ukraine has ended. In this case, Russia could help mitigate the contradictions between the United States and China in order to prevent a big war and build a more just and sustainable world.

Due to their geographical location between Europe and Asia, the tolerance of Eastern Christian culture, and broad political and economic ties, Russian people are destined to play an active role in maintaining global peace. The Russian leadership has already done much to stop ethnic conflicts in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East. Russia has initiated extended partnership with China, including within the framework of Greater Eurasia. Russia has made a significant contribution to the creation of multilateral formats such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, and others. Despite large-scale Western sanctions, the Russian economy has revealed not only its ability to survive, but also a broad network of global ties in the non-Western world. The outside world will still need Russia in the foreseeable future in order to update the ideas of dialogue and global interaction.

To go forward, Russia should use its relative advantages that need to be enhanced further.

Firstly, the historically long tradition of intercultural communication allowed learning and extensive borrowing from other nations. During the era of principalities, the Russians borrowed from the Scandinavians and the Greeks; during the Horde period and the gathering of Russian lands, they borrowed from nomadic peoples, later from the Turks, the Tatars, the Poles, the French, and other European and Western nations, and today they are actively borrowing from China and other non-Western countries. The fact that the Russians did

not follow the path of ethnic nationalism chosen by Germany and a number of other European countries in the first half of the 20th century suggests their special openness to the best world experience.

Secondly, Russian thought has always strongly criticized the Western system of capitalism and the individualistic model of democracy as contributing to the exploitation of the rest of the world, rather than its development. For centuries, Russian thinking has entertained the idea of a strong and just state capable of reconciling extremes, guaranteeing freedoms and reducing inequality. For all the differences, representatives of Russian thought have always defended the Russian ideal of “integral personality” that develops in harmony with him/herself and the surrounding world. This is the basis for the development of relations with the non-Western world in a situation where social inequality exacerbating international instability is growing globally. Russia will have to rethink the reasons for the success of the Russian civilizational dialogue outside the Western world amidst its confrontation with the United States and the West as a whole.

Thirdly, Russia has a unique geographical position for development and inter-civilizational communication. In this regard, Russian experts often talk about the development of Eurasia as a center for the realization of national interests and a space of geographical interaction with other countries in the region. This kind of regional development implies both awareness of one’s own civilizational identity and its openness to other civilizations.

In a word, lying ahead is a shift towards a more multilateral and multipolar world in which Russia could have an important role to play. Since this shift may be accompanied by deepening regionalization, the future of the post-Western world may be associated with an inter-civilizational dialogue at the macro-regional level. If Russia’s development prevails over stagnation, it will proceed further through gradual stabilization in the Eurasian macro-region as an open, safe, and multicultural space.