
The “Russian World”

Russia’s Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination

Marlene Laruelle



CGI CENTER ON GLOBAL INTERESTS

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of the “Russian World” (*russkii mir*) has a long history rooted in the 1990s, but it was propelled under the media spotlight in 2014, when Russian President Vladimir Putin used it to justify Russia’s interference in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. The Kremlin’s actions in its so-called “Near Abroad” — a reference to the post-Soviet space — are motivated mainly by its perception of Russia’s national security interests and the need to protect the country and the current political regime from destabilizing influences, be they coming directly from abroad or fed by domestic factors.

The concept of the Russian World offers a particularly powerful repertoire: it is a geopolitical imagination, a fuzzy mental atlas on which different regions of the world and their different links to Russia can be articulated in a fluid way. This blurriness is structural to the concept, and allows it to be reinterpreted within multiple contexts. First, it serves as a justification for what Russia considers to be its right to oversee the evolution of its neighbors, and sometimes for an interventionist policy. Secondly, its reasoning is for Russia to reconnect with its pre-Soviet and Soviet past through reconciliation with Russian diasporas abroad. Lastly, it is a critical instrument for Russia to brand itself on the international scene and to advance its own voice in the world. The Russian World is thus by essence a floating signifier developed by diverse actors around the Kremlin, one that speaks to different audiences and that can take specific flavors to be operationalized depending on the context.

This paper analyzes the trajectory of the term, its genesis and development, and moves on to discuss its dual identity — as Russia’s policy for the Near Abroad and Russia’s voice in the world. Finally, it explores the articulation of this term with Russia’s foreign policy orientations.¹

I. TRAJECTORY OF THE CONCEPT

In the concept of the Russian World, the notion of *world* should be understood by its ancient meaning, that of a civilizational space: ancient sources spoke about the Greek *world*, the Roman *world* and the Byzantine *world* as a way to define broad territories under the influence of a singular center. Not only did these large spaces share the center's cultural values, but they displayed political loyalty to it and were integrated into its economic orbit. In many of these aspects, the concept of the Russian World is an updated version of the ancient perception of a shared civilizational space. In the early years of its use, the term was often written using the pre-revolutionary Russian alphabet (Русский Миръ), reinforcing this old-fashioned flavor.

The 'Russian World' is an updated version of the ancient perception of a shared civilizational space.

Genesis of the Concept and its Fathers

The study of a concept begins with identifying its origin and terminological trajectory. One may try to attribute it to a specific creator — a politician, intellectual, philosopher — and follow its evolution, or look at the term as participating in a larger *Zeitgeist*. The term “Russian World” was used in medieval accounts to define ancient Rus. It can be traced to the 11th century in the writings of Russian Grand Prince of Kiev Iziaslav Iaroslavich, who spoke of a “Kherson and Russian World” in a letter addressed to the Roman Pope Clement.²

The term seems to have been taken from his account in the nineteenth century by Count Sergey Uvarov (1786-1855), president of the Imperial Academy of Sciences and minister of education, famous for having crafted the tripartite emblem of the reign of Czar Nicholas I: “Autocracy, Orthodoxy, Nationality.”³ However, the term was not commonly used, and preference was given to other concepts. The founding father of Slavophilism, Aleksei Khomyakov (1804-1860), spoke of the “Russian spirit” (*ruskii dukh*), the Silver Age philosophers Vladimir Soloviev and Nikolay Berdiaev of the “Russian idea” (*rusaskaia ideia*), and it is as common in Russia as in the West to encounter the idea of the “Russian soul” (*rusaskaia dusha*) when assuming that Russia is eternally miscomprehended.

The current, post-Soviet term of the “Russian World” has several fathers: a biological one, Petr Shchedrovitsky, and a spiritual father, Gleb Pavlovsky, who nurtured and inspired it. In 1995, Pavlovsky, who was then at the peak of his influence as Russia's foremost “image maker,” created what became

known as the Russian Institute. The idea emerged during a meeting in Greece of a few dozen Russian intellectuals who had gathered to discuss Russia's historical path and future. Under the leadership of Sergey Chernyshev, a philosopher by training who worked in several Soviet state agencies, they organized the publication of a collective volume titled *A Different One: Anthology of the New Russian Self-Awareness*.⁴

Divided into three sections (Russia as an object, Russia as a subject, and Russia as an idea), the work offered a panorama of views on the Soviet collapse and the challenges facing the new Russia, thereby reviving the tradition of a philosophical approach to Russia's identity. The thinking of the Russian-Jewish dissident philosopher Mikhail Gelter and his writings on Russian identity influenced several of the authors. Pavlovsky contributed to the volume a premonitory text, echoes of which can be found in today's Russia: "Russia remains a specific civilization, which masters all civilizations with its concise complexity, permeability, and powerful vocal and intellectual capacity that appeals to all human beings."⁵

The anthology turned into a more structured project through the establishment of the Russian Institute, whose declared mission is "the re-creation of the Russian as the new" (*vossozdanie russkogo kak novogo*), or, in other words, "the collection of personal ideas and individual spiritual findings to found a new Russian consensus."⁶ In the Russian Institute's manifesto, Gleb Pavlovsky and Sergey Chernyshev criticized the taboo affecting the term "Russian," (*russkii*) and the inability to speak serenely about Russian national consciousness (*russkoe samosoznanie*).⁷ In 1997, the Institute gave birth to *Russkii zhurnal*, a diverse and original, high-quality publishing platform that helped revive the debate on contemporary Russian identity and its contradictory trends. The journal would inspire many subsequent online media projects and serve as an incubator for a large number of young publicists, thinkers, and journalists.⁸

Petr Shchedrovitsky worked during this time for Pavlovsky's main consulting firm, the Foundation for Effective Policy, which introduced marketing techniques to Russia and was, among others, in charge of developing new "strategies" for Russia's regions and major industries, as well as launching image campaigns for politicians. Passionate about Russian philosophy, Shchedrovitsky participated in the *Different One* collection and led major efforts to publish several volume collections of the main Russian writers and philosophers of the twentieth century.

In a text dated December 15, 1997, Shchedrovitsky and his colleague Efim Ostrovsky authored a paper entitled, "An Eagle Spreads its Wings: 1111 Signs in 1111 Days Before the New Millennium. Manifesto for a New Generation," published in both *Ekspert* and *Finansovye izvestiia*. In it they addressed the concept

of "Russia's World" (*mir Rossii*),⁹ described as a peaceful reestablishment of Russia's identity and its reconnection with its past and its diasporas. In Shchedrovitsky's mind, one of the brightest parts of Russian identity and intellectual production has been shaped abroad, during the emigration. After decades of division during the Soviet period, the reconciliation process of Russia at home and Russia abroad was

on its way. Shchedrovitsky and Ostrovsky's definition of Russia's World was molded by the notion of destiny: "We, Russians, are a multinational people. Being Russian is not about blood, being Russian is about a shared destiny."¹⁰

After decades of division, the reconciliation of Russia at home and abroad was on its way.

However, this 1997 text spoke of *Russia's World*, not yet of a *Russian World*. It was not until 1999 that the term emerged in its current form in a new article by the same authors entitled "Russia: The Country that Does Not Exist," and followed by a revealing subtitle: "To create the image of Russia today is to create new connections (*sviazi*) among Russians."¹¹ The text, which has not lost its timeliness, reads like a manifesto inspired by Gleb Pavlovsky on the necessity of the country to construct an image (*imidzh* in Russian). The authors explicitly referred to marketing techniques, and mentioned, for instance, the cigarette brand Camel launching the Camel Trophy as a successful instance of "rebranding." Aware that they were introducing foreign terms and concepts to the Russian public at the time, the authors explained that the country needed a brand as understood in the sense of "humanitarian technologies" (*gumanitarnye tekhnologii*), then moved to the more explicit phrasing of "public relations development" (*razvitie obshchestvennykh svyazei*). As a result, the notion of the Russian World has, since its birth, been associated with the idea of a domestic and international brand for Russia.

In their 1999 article, Shchedrovitsky and Ostrovsky elaborated on their definition of the Russian World. According to them, "Over the course of the twentieth century, following tectonic historical shifts, world wars and revolutions, a Russian World was created on Earth — a network of small and large communities, thinking and speaking in Russian. It is not a secret that the territory of the Russian Federation contains only half of this Russian World. The state formation created on the territory of the Russian Federation at the turn of the 1990s did not turn out to be an adequate means for incorporating Russian society into the global historical process (...). This process of social degradation (the collapse of the Soviet Union) has been compensated by the formation, over the course of the twentieth century, of a sizeable Russian diaspora in the world."¹² In conclusion, the article highlights the innovative character of the Russian World as a sign of a new, globalized Russia: "A Russian World in a Peaceful World (*russkii mir v mire mirov*), attracting Russians from all over the world to participate in a new global meta-project."¹³

Shchedrovitsky himself has re-contextualized the birth of the term. In a 2001 interview, he recounted that the notion appeared between 1993 and 1997, "gradually crystallizing from a proto-concept, an amorphous sentiment, to a complete concept."¹⁴ He recalled that the term was born at the beginning of 1998, when the Foundation for Effective Policy had been commissioned to write a Concept for Russia's CIS policy. "It was the first time the hypothesis that (...) a similar number of Russians live inside Russia's borders and beyond them was mentioned. (...) The idea of the Russian World was the conceptual backbone of this document. And one month earlier, this idea was exposed in our article 'An Eagle Spreads its Wings'.¹⁵ Shchedrovitsky insisted on the collective authorship of the term: "If one wants to establish individual authorship, then Sergey Chernyshev and Gleb Pavlovsky directly influenced the idea of the Russian World with their Russian Institute."¹⁶ During this interview, Shchedrovitsky added a new element to his definition of the Russian World: it is not only shaped by a shared destiny, but by a common language. He insisted once again on the project's globalization aspect: "The Russian World, it is the means, the instrument to make Russia and the Russian Federation adapt to globalization. Small countries adapt themselves by letting globalization into them; large ones do so by entering the space of globalization."¹⁷

Several conclusions can be drawn from this brief analysis of the genesis of the Russian World concept.

First, the term Russian/*russkii* (and not Rossian/*rossiiskii*) was at the center of the project that Pavlovsky and his circle were working on in 1995 when they launched the Russian Institute. These individuals were far from the ethno-nationalists who sought an ethnically pure, minority-free Russia; "Russian" in

their definition should not be understood as having an ethnocentric character. Their project to overhaul Russia's identity sought to be encompassing, sketching out a future Russia that is in dialogue with the world, and comfortable enough with the market economy to borrow from commercial strategies. Still, they did not use the term *Rossian/rossiiskii*, which was overly reminiscent of the Yeltsin political project and its limits. A *rossiiskaia* Russia embodies a failed liberal ideology, the inability of Russia to be proud of its identity, and the diffuse impression of cloning what the West wanted Russia to be. Unlike the Yeltsin project, Pavlovsky, Chernyshev and Shchedrovitsky's *rusaskaia* Russia is called both to participate in the globalized world and to offer a particular Russian voice.

Second, it is important to note the background of the designers of the Russian World concept. They were all passionate about Russian philosophy, eager to rediscover Soloviev and Berdiaev, and at the

same time were specialists in marketing and branding. This merging of genres proved to be a successful mix. It allowed them — as it allows the presidential administration today — to combine theoretical and practical talents to shape information: the marketing techniques that Pavlovsky introduced to Russia have been successfully mastered by Vladislav Surkov and many other “polit-technologists” in the Putin administration.

The Russian World is characterized by the dual aspects of marketing and messianism.

The Russian World is characterized by this dual aspect: in the marketing sense, it is a brand for establishing Russia's voice in the chorus of nations, but it is also a vessel for a more philosophical or religious messianism, with the notion that Russia's message to the world has a universal value of salvation.

Third, the Russian World concept, from its origin, mediates three different referents, the articulation of which is never explicit. It may be a reference to: 1. Russia's policy for its near abroad (the concept emerged under the auspices of a study of Russia's CIS policy); 2. Russia's interaction with Russian diasporas in the world (the concept was structured at a time of rediscovery of the richness of the emigration's intellectual life); and 3. Russia's brand, both as a public-relations project and a messianic project.

The Russian World Concept and the Compatriots Project

As Petr Shchedrovitsky noted in his interview, the Russian World concept did not immediately convince those who had commissioned the Concept for Russia's CIS policy. But it was used for the first time officially in 2001 by Vladimir Putin in his speech before the first World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad. The new president declared, “The notion of the Russian World extends far from Russia's geographical borders and even far from the borders of the Russian ethnicity.”¹⁸

How did we get from the relative silence with which the text was received in 1998 to its official use by the president in 2001? To understand this, it is helpful to follow the trajectory of another concept, that of the “compatriot” (*sootchestvennik*). Indeed the Russian World concept has a half-brother, the “Russian Question” (*ruskii vopros*). The term originally came from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his famous 1994 work, *The Russian Question at the End of the 20th Century*.¹⁹ According to the author, the new Russia must be reborn from its spiritual ashes by reconnecting with its pre-Soviet past and revitalizing the rural world that was destroyed by the violent modernization programs under Stalin and Khrushchev. Russia

has been alienated from itself by the Soviet experiment not only ideologically, but territorially: it should forget about the South Caucasus and Central Asia, products of a sick imperial expansion, and resume privileged links with Belarus, Ukraine, and northern Kazakhstan, all to be united in a single state of Eastern Slavs.

With the *Russian Question*, Solzhenitsyn brilliantly expressed a political movement present since the Soviet collapse and embodied by the Congress of Russian Communities (KRO).²⁰ Among the anti-Yeltsin groups that dominated the Supreme Soviet at the time — Zyuganov's Communist Party and Zhirinovskiy's Liberal-Democratic Party — the KRO established its own distinctive voice. It did not call for a pure and simple restoration of the Soviet Union or for rebuilding an imperial influence on the entire post-Soviet territory. Rather, it called for protecting Russian minorities and, if possible, for modifying borders in order to integrate Belarus, Transnistria, at least part of Ukraine, and northern Kazakhstan into the Russian Federation.

Along with Dmitri Rogozin, its main leader, the KRO featured Konstantin Zatulin, the long-time director of the influential Institute for the CIS and Compatriots; Sergei Glazyev, who at that time represented Russian social-democrats who did not identify with the Communist Party; Natalia Narochinskaya, who stood for small pro-Orthodox political groups; then-Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov;²¹ and some Duma MPs such as Sergei Baburin, Viktor Aksyuchits, and Viktor Alksnis.²² The KRO was also joined by General Alexander Lebed, at the time the governor of Krasnoyarsk Krai and later Russia's Security Council Secretary.²³

The KRO claimed “the right of the Russian nation to unification in a united state on its historical territory, to the rebirth of the fatherland's great power, to well-being, and to the development of all the peoples of Russia.”²⁴ Despite its electoral failure, the KRO left behind a considerable political heritage. Its “Manifesto of Russia's Rebirth” and “Declaration of the Rights of Compatriots” directly influenced the first official texts the Duma adopted on the topic. In 1997, a bill on Russia's policy toward compatriots was the first to define precise rights for these individuals, but was vetoed by Yeltsin. A new bill, “On the Russian Federation's Policy in its Relations with Foreign Compatriots,” passed in 1999 and confirmed that the Russian authorities found it difficult to take a stance on the issue. The text remained strictly declarative and did not put forward any legal definition of the so-called compatriots.²⁵

Vladimir Putin's promotion to the presidency in 2000 created a new dynamic for the compatriot issue. From his first months in power, the president decried the demographic danger that was creeping up on Russia and threatened it with extinction. In 2001, the government adopted the “Concept on the Demographic Development of Russia 2001-2015” that defined immigration as one of the country's priorities. A new concept, the “Principal Directions of the Federation toward Compatriots Living Abroad for 2002-2005,” for the first time outlined the range of possible actions that Russia could take on the issue of its compatriots. The document simultaneously played the card of defense of Russians abroad and that of their repatriation for demographic and workforce-related issues: “The Federation's policy toward compatriots living abroad is oriented with a view to their adjustment in their adopted country, with a deliberate conservation of their ethno-cultural specificity, but also with a view to the formation of mechanisms for their legal and controlled migration to Russia and the reaching of an optimal balance between both processes.”²⁶ A new policy infrastructure around “compatriots” and the Russian world was born.

As was the case with the Russian World, the concept of the “compatriot” was intended to remain fuzzy.²⁷ As early as 2001, Putin insisted on its fluidity: “The compatriot is not only a legal category. More importantly, it is not an issue of status or favoritism. It is primarily a matter of personal choice. Of self-identification. I would even say, of spiritual self-identification.”²⁸ The term includes several concentric circles: “Russian citizens permanently residing abroad; individuals and their descendants who live abroad and are linked (*otnosiashchiesia*) to the peoples historically residing on Russian Federation territory; those making the free choice of a spiritual, cultural, and legal link to Russia; those whose ancestors resided on Russian Federation territory, including former Soviet citizens now living in states that were part of the Soviet Union, regardless of whether they became citizens of another state or are stateless; and those who emigrated from the Russian state, the Russian republic, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the Soviet Union, or the Russian Federation that either became citizens of another state or became stateless persons.”²⁹

The term moves therefore from a civic core (expatriate citizens) to a broader group of people who are culturally and spiritually oriented toward Russia (this formulation prevents a purely ethnic or linguistic definition of “ethnic Russians”) before encompassing the even larger group of all Soviet peoples and people who were part of the Czarist Empire (according to the definition, citizens of Poland and Finland could apply for compatriot status). The last and broadest concentric circle is that of Russia’s “bedfellows” and has been added to encompass all those who speak Russian, appreciate Russian culture, and who identify with the fate of Russia.

It would be misguided to attribute the success of the “compatriot” terminology solely to the KRO and its leaders, though they played an important role in moving the issue from the realm of radical nationalism to that of state policy. The Kremlin’s PR personalities also continuously worked on merging the “compatriot issue” with the Russian World concept. The website “Russian Archipelago” (obviously a reference to Solzhenitsyn’s work) by Boris Mezhuev and Sergey Gradirovsky offers the most complete record of this effort. Shchedrovitsky expanded the transnational character of the Russian World in an article in *Nezavisimaia gazeta* in 2000.³⁰

Boris Mezhuev, a prolific journalist and editor-in-chief of influential news agencies such as APN, pointed out that in the second half of the nineteenth century, St. Petersburg aristocratic circles started the journal *Russkii mir* to fight against the strengthening of the autocracy: this assumption should be read as a sign of the role of the concept today in democratizing Russia, reconnecting it to the world and avoiding its marginalization and isolation.³¹ Sergey Gradirovsky, one of the most innovative of the Kremlin’s consultants on issues of nationality policy and known for his theories on Russian Islam, unpacked many of the ambiguities of Russia’s diaspora policy in several articles. In a text prepared for Putin’s inauguration in 2000, he evokes the issue of Russia’s cultural leadership in its Near Abroad³² and criticizes the authorities’ hesitations between an ethnocentric defense of Russian ethnics and what he called, borrowing from Dostoyevsky, the “Russian universal” (*russkoe vseмирnoe*).³³

II. THE RUSSIAN WORLD AS RUSSIA’S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Conceived in the 1990s, the concept of the Russian World took off during the following decade. It was progressively institutionalized within Russian state agencies, embodying both Russia’s policy in the Near Abroad and Russia’s public diplomacy toward the rest of the world, especially in the West. Public diplomacy is both a new and a deep-rooted concept for Russia. The Soviet Union had a very sophisticated public diplomacy machine, which post-Soviet Russia lost during the 1990s and had to recreate over the following decade. The terminology is fluid; Russian language uses both “public diplomacy” (*obshchestvennaia* or *publichnaia diplomatiia*) and “humanitarian cooperation” (*gumanitarnoe sotrudnichestvo*) to refer to the same concept.³⁴

Conceived in the 1990s, the concept of the Russian World was progressively institutionalized in Russian state agencies.

The Russian World as Russia’s Policy for the Near Abroad

The Russian conception of the Near Abroad as a specific region of interest was formed and expressed almost immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, despite the fact that the country lacked the capacity to exert its policies until it was able to tap into new political and financial resources in the 2000s.

In August 1992, the then-chairman of the parliamentary Joint Committee on International Affairs and Foreign Economic Relations, Yevgeny Ambartsumov, criticized Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev for lacking a clear policy for the Near Abroad, and explicitly noted: “As the internationally recognized legal successor to the USSR, the Russian Federation should base its foreign policy on a doctrine declaring the entire geopolitical space of the former Union to be the sphere of its vital interests (like the United States’ Monroe Doctrine in Latin America) and should strive to achieve understanding and recognition from the world community of its special interests in this space.”³⁵ This early reference to the Monroe Doctrine would later be updated by Russia’s dynamic policy in fostering friendly public opinion in the neighboring countries through the creation of a shared information space.

The privileged status of the Near Abroad in Russia’s foreign policy grew under the leadership of foreign affairs and then-Prime Minister (1996-1999) Yevgeny Primakov, who affirmed that Russia’s attempt to regain its international status involved recovering its role as a center of influence over the post-Soviet space.³⁶ On June 28, 2000, the Russian president Putin formulated a new foreign policy for the Federation, which recognized the country’s limited capacities and the need to make a certain amount of geopolitical concessions, and gave priority to the Near Abroad.³⁷ The color revolutions, particularly the

2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, were seen as a failure of Russia's policy in its neighborhood. Sergey Markov, a professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) known for his pro-Kremlin stance and his role as one of the PR representatives of the Putin regime, stated that Russia lost Georgia and Ukraine because its political technologies were inferior to those of the West.³⁸

The Kremlin's perception that it was defeated in its neighborhood had serious repercussions and revived Moscow's will to invest into soft power and image-making. The Presidential Directorate for Interregional and Cultural Relations (*Upravlenie Prezidenta Rossii po mezhhregional'nyim i kul'turnym svyaziam*) was put in charge of conceptualizing Russia's new policy toward the Near Abroad. This directorate was led by another influential "polit-technologist," Modest Kolerov, who was dismissed after the 2007 Bronze

The Kremlin's perception that it was defeated in its neighborhood revived Moscow's interest in soft power.

Soldier scandal in Estonia.³⁹ Russia's Near-Abroad policy has been structured under the supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its specialized agency, Roszarubezhtsentr (the Russian Center for International Scientific and Cultural Cooperation), which in 2008 became Rossotrudnichestvo (the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation).⁴⁰ This policy can be summarized as follows:

Economic investments. In the 2000s, Russia used its petroleum revenue to make economic investments in the Near Abroad, using large state corporations and private firms to drive the country's recovered economic visibility. Energy firms such as Gazprom, Rosneft, Itera and Lukoil helped Moscow to develop an energy-based soft-power strategy toward Ukraine, and to a lesser extent Central Asia, by controlling pipelines, building new processing plants and overseeing the gas station business. Electricity-production firms (RAO-Unified Energy System, but also private actors such as RusAl) embodied Russian influence in the hydropower sector in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia. Russian banks and investment firms displayed such dynamism that they largely shaped the banking sector of the entire CIS. Russia also could impact the economic viability of its neighbors via large boycotts or embargos on food products from reluctant neighbors, or through communications and infrastructure.⁴¹

Multilateral organizations. Since its creation the Commonwealth of Independent States remains a dysfunctional body for regional dialogue, as many of its members do not wish to integrate on a regional level. Thus, in the 2000s Russia designed more specific and efficient multilateral tools, which only target select countries: the Collective Security Treaty Organization (Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) for the security realm, and several iterations of an economic union, primarily the Eurasian Economic Community, then the Customs Union, and now the Eurasian Economic Union (Belarus and Kazakhstan, with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joining). Member states of these multilateral institutions are more directly and legally linked to Russia than the others.

NGO diplomacy. Russia sponsors the activities of Russia-friendly associations in the Near Abroad, but at very different levels depending on the country's domestic situation and its authorities' positioning toward Moscow. This policy includes the support to a pro-Russian civil society consisting of associations representing Russian minorities (from cultural clubs devoted to folklore activities to Russian political

parties when authorized, for instance in Latvia), and of pro-Russian youth movements, think tanks, and analytical centers. It also offers political support in the form of public relations actions in favor of pro-Russian figures, an election monitoring organization (the Commonwealth of the Independent States Election Monitoring Organization, CIS-EMO) that has been sending election observers to CIS members since 2002, and several pro-Russian minority or pro-secessionist institutions (the Legal Information Centre of Human Rights in Estonia, the International Council for Democratic Institutions and State Sovereignty in Transnistria, and the Caucasus Institute for Democracy and the Free Europe Foundation in South Ossetia).⁴²

Culture, media and language promotion. Russia took the time to understand and promote the potential of its historical legacy as the colonial power in Eurasia. It has progressively put in place strategies to promote Russian culture and language through cultural centers at Russian embassies, historical commemorations, maintaining the graves of Russian soldiers fallen abroad, exchange programs, joint universities and joint curricula, and grants and fellowships for CIS students and professionals who want to study in Russia (not to mention the thousands of CIS soldiers and officers trained in Russian military academies).⁴³ Massive labor migration plays in favor of this policy, with countries of origin such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan asking Moscow to sponsor new Russian-speaking schools on their territories. Since the second half of the 2000s, the Kremlin has made it a priority to invest in the media realm, seeing that a stranglehold over the information space was one of the smartest strategies to ensure its role in the Near Abroad. Molding information also includes measures of retaliation, such as cyberattacks (with the most famous cases having targeted Estonia).⁴⁴

Repatriation programs. Moscow launched a "Program of State Assistance for Voluntary Travel of Compatriots to Russia" in 2006.⁴⁵ The state agencies in charge of the program sought primarily to bring back expatriate citizens as well as those with dual nationality, whether they live in the Near or Far Abroad (the rest of the world). In reality the program raised interest almost exclusively among Russians or Russian-speakers from the CIS, mostly in Central Asia and the South Caucasus.⁴⁶ However, this repatriation program has, by and large, come too late. The majority of Russians who wished to settle in Russia had already arrived before the program, and those remaining abroad are now relatively well integrated. Moreover the efficiency of the program, especially the job and housing opportunities to be provided by each of the selected regions, is very minimal. Since its inception in 2006, about 125,000 people have been repatriated under the program, far from the planned 450,000, although the pace of return is accelerating.⁴⁷ With the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 numbers became more difficult to calculate, with almost one million refugees and migrants fleeing the conflict by moving to Russia.

Citizenship policy and passports. Accession to Russian citizenship is relatively liberal. A special provision of law made it possible for all former Soviet citizens to apply for Russian citizenship with only a temporary or a permanent residence permit. This law was revoked in 2009. However, in 2014 came new, simpler and faster rules for granting citizenship to people who speak Russian and have at least one ancestor who was a permanent resident of Russia or the Soviet Union.⁴⁸ A new bill was introduced to create a simplified procedure for "Russian-speaking citizens of the former Soviet Union, irrespective of nationality, who are in danger of a threat of ethno-cultural, political, or professional discrimination" to acquire Russian citizenship.⁴⁹

In the early 1990s, Moscow had hoped to establish mechanisms of dual citizenship with its neighbors, but few of them agreed (Turkmenistan until 2003, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan today). Since then, Russia

has managed informal policies to deliver passports to the populations of secessionist regions. Ninety percent of South Ossetians are said to have Russian passports, as well as smaller numbers of Abkhazians, Transnistrians, and Crimeans, which allows Russia to claim a right to protect its citizens. Hundreds of thousands of labor migrants from the former Soviet Union have also managed to get a Russian passport without surrendering the passport from their home country, giving Russia potential leverage over some of its neighbors. Russia also replicated fast-track mechanisms to access citizenship, taken from Western models. Such programs exist for investors, businessmen, highly qualified specialists, and now for those serving at least five years in the newly created Russian Foreign Legion.⁵⁰

Military involvement. Russia has had direct military involvement, recognized by the Russian authorities, in two countries across the post-Soviet space. The first was in Moldova in 1992, with the intervention of the 14th Army (about 14,000 professional soldiers) backing Tiraspol's elites in favor of Transnistria's autonomy from Chisinau. The second was in 2008, with Russian military intervention in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, legitimized in the name of protecting Russian citizens from Georgia's aggression. Other military involvement has been indirect (in Nagorno-Karabakh or during the Tajik civil war in the early 1990s), or is not recognized as such by the Russian authorities. Russia still claims that it has not intervened militarily in the Donbass. It has just recognized the role of Russian troops, and especially of its Sevastopol military base, in "creating the conditions" for the Crimea referendum of March 2014.⁵¹

State organs working on Russia's policy for the Near Abroad put relatively little emphasis on the Russian World concept, or only do so in overarching statements. In such instances they use more precise terminology, such as "compatriots" or "shared information space." In this sense, the Russian World is Russia's sphere of influence, the countries over which Moscow considers having a right to say. This influence policy is based on an extremely wide spectrum of activities and options, ranging from memory of a shared past to military involvement, through market economy principles and media wars.

Soft power, defined as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment",⁵² can also transform itself into a gateway for hard power. This claim to oversee its neighborhood is legitimized by what Russia perceives as its own state security and the feeling

Russia's policy toward its compatriots has been mostly pragmatic.

that its sovereignty is under threat by any anti-Russian environment in the Near Abroad. This inflection of the Russian World does not call into question the independence of Russia's neighbors *per se*, but rather their geopolitical orientations. Russia's policy toward its compatriots has thus been mostly pragmatic: it supported them as "an instrument of securing leadership in the territory of the former Soviet Union rather than as a goal in itself."⁵³

The Russian World as Russia's Public Diplomacy

It is outside the Near Abroad that the Russian World concept has been most used. In the past, the Soviet Union had built up a vast community of bedfellows all over the world, and relied on a very structured network of friendship associations, front organizations, twin cities, and movements with declared political goals (peace promotion, etc.) that were seen as supporting its overall agenda. However, this form of public diplomacy quickly fell apart following the onset of perestroika and the collapse of the USSR,

and took some time to be rebuilt. While the broad strokes of Russia's policy toward the Near Abroad emerged relatively quickly, it was more complicated to remake the "fellow traveler" policy because Russia did not have a particular ideology to promote to the rest of the world.

As previously noted, the need to create an image for Russia as a means of engagement with the rest of the world is present in the very DNA of the Russian World concept. Russia's strategy of embracing globalization reached its peak during Vladimir Putin's second term as president (2004-2008), followed by the Medvedev years (2008-2012). The country's economy was booming, and the Russian authorities were confident in their rediscovered abilities and in the country's integration into the world, both politically and economically.

At the root of the Russian World concept is the need to create a means of engagement with the rest of the world.

It was during Putin's second mandate that the new methods of public diplomacy took shape. In 2004 Moscow launched the Valdai Club, a platform to create a dialogue between international experts on Russia; in 2007, it founded the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation in order to advance its own perception of human rights and democracy, in accordance with the notion of "sovereign democracy" crafted by Vladislav Surkov; 2008 saw the launch of the Public Diplomacy Foundation, followed by the Russian Council on International Affairs, another expert platform on international affairs, in 2010. At the same time Russia also invested massive sums in its information space by launching multiple new media initiatives both for Russian-speaking audiences as well as for the international community, such as Russia Today and Russia Beyond the Headlines.

The Russian World concept finds a natural home in this context. In 2006, in a speech at the Derzhavin House in St. Petersburg, Putin mentioned the concept for a second time, announcing that 2007 would be the year of the Russian language. He stated that "the Russian World can and should unite all those for whom the Russian language and culture is dear, whether they live in Russia or beyond its borders. Use this term, Russian World, more often."⁵⁴ A few months later he established the Russian World Fund, under the joint umbrella of the ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Education and Science.

Through its foundation, the Russian World Fund carries on the ambiguity of focusing on compatriots and opening up to all those interested in supporting Russia in the world. The Fund's leadership was given to a loyal intellectual apparatchik close to Pavlovsky, Viacheslav Nikonov, the head of the Politika Foundation. The Fund defines the Russian World as consisting of "not only Russians, not only Rossians, not only our compatriots in the Near and Far Abroad, émigrés and their descendants. It also includes foreign citizens, speaking Russian, studying it, and all those who are honestly interested in Russia and care for its future. (...) In forming the Russian World as a global project, Russia is creating for itself a new identity, new possibilities for effective cooperation with the rest of the world, and new incentives for its own development."⁵⁵

The Fund functions as an umbrella platform for other institutions that include the International Fund of Slavic Literature and Culture, created during the perestroika years and supported by the Moscow Patriarchate; the Fund of Historical Perspective, created in 2004 by Natalia Narochnitskaya; the Likhachev Fund, which supports the historical and literary heritage of this major figure of twentieth century

Russian culture; the “Unity in the Name of Russia” Fund, created in 2003 and directed by Nikonov, which unites many prestigious academic institutions (including Moscow State University, Moscow State Legal Academy, and the Institute for Information in Social Sciences of the Academy of Sciences); and the St. Andrew the First-Called Foundation, created by Putin’s close associate Vladimir Yakunin and his spouse Natalia Yakunina to “study and preserve the Russian national legacy both in Russia and abroad, as well as to provide for the peaceful coexistence of different nations and confessions”.⁵⁶

The Fund also covers and finances the Institute of Russia Abroad (*Institut russkogo zarubezh'ia*), created in 2005 to manage several websites for compatriots, such as *Russkie.org* and *Russkii vek*, and to cooperate with the European Russian Alliance, the network of Russian associations in European Union countries. The main event that the Russian World Fund organizes is the so-called Assembly of the Russian World, held on November 4, the day of National Unity, and attended by the highest-ranking state figures, including the president and many government officials.⁵⁷

The Russian World Fund and Rossotrudnichestvo

Cooperation between the Russian World Fund and Rossotrudnichestvo is narrow. Rossotrudnichestvo mainly covers the Near Abroad, although its missions are not geographically limited. Its core activities relate to promotion of the Russian language and cultural, scientific and educational exchanges. In cooperation with the Governmental Commission on Compatriots Living Abroad (GCCLA), it offers support to compatriots and works with a variety of associations, including the International Council of Russia’s Compatriots, the Association “Homeland,” the International Associations of Youth Compatriots, and the Moscow House of Compatriots.⁵⁸ Finally, Rossotrudnichestvo is involved to a lesser extent in Russia’s international aid programs, mostly directed at CIS countries, with the fledgling RusAid based on the USAID model.⁵⁹

Labor division between the two institutions is not geographic. Rossotrudnichestvo is a state agency that directly represents Moscow and is financed with public funds, while the Russian World Fund, while financed mainly by the state, embodies the Russian “civil society.” The different organizations working under its umbrella may apply for public funding through a grant process, but they are legally independent from the state, can raise money from other sources, and can display slightly differing positions. More importantly, the activities of the Russian World online are larger than the Near Abroad issue. Priority has been given to a more holistic vision of Russia and its heritage, which includes older Russian diasporas (in Europe, North America, and Israel), the Russian historical presence in the world (protection of monuments linked to Russia), and the promotion of Russian language and culture more broadly.

The Russian World as a Fluid Concept

Putin mentioned the Russian World on a third occasion, this time in a speech on March 18, 2014, while justifying Russia’s annexation of Crimea. He said that he hoped Germany, as a country formerly divided, would understand and support the “aspiration of the Russian World, of Russian history, to reestablish unity.”⁶⁰ In this quotation the Russian World was understood by Putin to mean Russians outside Russia, and in that particular case, the Russians of Crimea. His vision was shared by Dmitri Peskov, the Kremlin’s press secretary, who prior to Putin’s speech in early March 2014 proclaimed that “Russia is the country that underlies the Russian World, and the president of that country is Putin; Putin precisely is the main guarantor of the security of the Russian world.”⁶¹ Here again, the Russian World seems to imply Russians abroad, and supposedly under threat.

However, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov has made reference to the term as more cultural than political. In early 2015, responding to the Lithuanian media, he criticized those who would accuse Russia of wanting to annex new territories. “You began by saying that everyone is afraid of Russia’s desire to reestablish the Soviet Union, to seek the reunification of Russian lands. I ask, if you have concrete sources, to show me the official Russian citations proposing to reestablish the Soviet Union or reunify the Russian world (*sobirat’ russkii mir*). The Russian world, it is totally different. The Russian world is about culture, language, values, and religious orientations. One can draw an analogy (albeit imperfectly) with Francophonie, the Ibero-American community, and Confucius, Goethe, or Cervantes institutes. (...) Like any normal country [we] wish to preserve [our] cultural heritage.”⁶² In that statement, Lavrov’s definition does not fully overlap with the concept as advanced by Putin and Peskov.

In addition, like any successful concept, the Russian World has developed a life of its own outside the framework of the state administration. Researchers regularly discuss it, for example the director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology Valeri Tishkov, who wrote an article about it in 2007,⁶³ and several students made it the topic of their doctoral dissertation.⁶⁴ Different nationalist ideologists and intellectuals of all kinds have sought to define the contours of the concept. Some advance the idea of the Russian World as a “new type of statehood.”⁶⁵ The Moscow Patriarchate also uses the term; however, Patriarch Kirill has a clear preference for another concept: that of Holy Russia. This term encompasses the referential canonic territory of the Patriarchate, i.e. Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and Kazakhstan.⁶⁶ Last but not least, in Russian, the term *russkii mir* has a second meaning, that of a “Russian peace.” Although it is rarely used in this way, the ambiguity over the meaning of the term remains. The perception of a Russian World as a *Pax Russica*⁶⁷ should therefore not be excluded from the broader picture.

One can only note how the concept of the Russian World remains elastic in terms of its borders and contents. The institutions that try to implement the Russian World as public diplomacy function through a network that is particularly well adapted to the term’s fluidity. Each can apprehend its objectives differently and invest in a specific area with the blessing of the state, but without the Kremlin micro-managing every aspect of this public-diplomacy policy.

III. THE RUSSIAN WORLD AND RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Yet is the concept of the Russian World harmoniously articulated with other aspects of Russia's foreign policy? How will a dialogue be established between the Russian World and pressing realities that are more rooted in Russia's economic and security policies? In considering these questions, I look here at Russia's three main foreign policy agendas: building a Eurasian Union, deepening the partnership with China, and promoting a conservative ideology in the West.

Building a Eurasian Union

Russia's regional reintegration projects have long been a failure because they sought to include the entire CIS space (excluding the Baltic States, which were considered outsiders from the beginning). These projects were given a new impetus with Russia's renewed economic attractiveness and a better targeted policy toward some but not all of its neighbors. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) that came into force on January 1, 2015 is the culmination of eight years of negotiations in the Customs Union, including an agreement to remove border controls between member states in July 2011 and a treaty for a common economic area in July 2012. The EEU is the first post-Soviet regional accord with noticeable effects on the economies of its members.⁶⁸

The Eurasian Union is a personal project for both Putin and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev. This Eurasian strategy, which draws inspiration from the European model, does not intend to recreate the Soviet Union, as some U.S. officials have unfortunately stated. Rather, it is based on a convincing "SWOT" analysis — a structured planning method used to evaluate strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats — of Russia's position in a globalized world. The conclusions it reached can be summarized as: 1. Russia cannot ensure its status as one of the world powers if it is not also recognized as regional power in Eurasia; 2. Russia's economy must be reinforced by synergies with some of its neighbors, in terms of transit, energy markets, and agriculture; and 3. Russia's natural attraction in its neighborhood cannot be a legacy of the past, but must be carried by concrete economic development and investment projects.

In this narrative, Russia projects itself as the leader and pivot-point of the Eurasian continent. But in practice, only selected countries see Moscow as a serious partner: current EEU members Belarus and Kazakhstan, acceding members Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The EEU will therefore largely overlap with the membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and is mostly oriented toward Central Asia. As a first step toward realizing the broader Eurasian Union project, the Eurasian Economic Union is intended to put four principles into practice: free movement of goods,

services, capital, and people. At the moment, there is only free movement of goods and labor; multiple barriers hamper the other two.

The Eurasian and the Russian World narratives are in opposition in several regards. First, they are not of the same nature. The Russian World project is a soft power repertoire that targets society more than elites or state structures, while the Eurasian projects are an institutional, economic, and strategic reality that affects the development patterns of the member states.

Second, they do not overlap in geographic terms. The Russian World concept is simultaneously broader and smaller than the Eurasian one. It is broader because its founding principle is to structure Russia's

The Russian World concept is simultaneously broader and smaller than the Eurasian one.

voice in the world, beyond the boundaries of its historical neighborhood. It is smaller because within the post-Soviet space, it focuses mostly on Russian ethnic minorities and Russian-speakers rather than on entire populations. In contrast, the Eurasian narrative puts so-called "titular" and Russian-speaking populations on the same level, without discrimination. Moreover, Russia's activities in favor of the Russian World mainly target republics not destined to integrate into the Eurasian Union — the Baltic states, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia — in other words, the states that are resistant to Russia's reintegration projects. The Russian minorities in Central Asia never caught the same attention from Russian authorities or the same benefits from Russian support policies, because the Central Asian regimes are considered loyal to Russia.

In theory, the two concepts could be complementary. If the Russian World were only used to define Russia's voice in the world, then the Eurasian Union project would be part of the Russian World concept, the part devoted to the neighborhood and centered on shared economic strategies. If the Russian World is Russia taking care of all those who identify themselves with Russia linguistically and culturally, then it could be the cultural aspect of the broader Eurasian Union project.

But these complements do not exist in practice; rather, a deep contradiction has emerged between them. Russia's use of Russian minorities in the Near Abroad as a coercive tool against unfriendly regimes suggests that the Russian World concept is deployed against all those who do not want to be part of a Russia-backed Eurasia. The Baltic states indirectly, Moldova and Georgia directly, and Ukraine since 2014 have seen their Russian minorities (in the sense of all those oriented toward Russia, including South-Ossetians and Abkhazians) being used as an asymmetric weapon in order to weaken the anti-Russian positions of central authorities. Meanwhile, Putin's insistence in stating that the Kazakh people have an interest in "remaining in the so-called greater Russian world"⁶⁹ spurs criticisms in Kazakhstan: the use of the term of a "greater Russian world" (*bol'shoi russkii mir*) against the more neutral concept of Eurasia, accompanied by Putin's statement about Kazakhstan's lacking state traditions, was received as a disdainful and imperial rumination.

One can conclude that the Russian World, in the sense of Russian minorities, is invoked when Eurasia fails. The countries that have aligned themselves to the Eurasian project, such as Kazakhstan, do not see their Russian minorities being instrumentalized by the Kremlin for political means; neither do those countries that do not want to take part in regional institutions

but continue to maintain good bilateral relations with Russia, such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. However, the Russian World in its original meaning, as Russia's voice in the world, has been more effective. Russia's ability to create its own information space guarantees a large public opinion in line with Kremlin views that extends beyond ethnic Russians. Central Asian public opinion, although critical of Russia's post-colonial condescension toward the region, still mostly consumes Russian media, as well as Russian cultural and educational products, and looks at the world through Russian eyes. This region can be considered a part of the Russian World in the sense of belonging to the Russian information space.

Deepening Ties with China

The Russian World concept does not seem to take into account China's rise to power globally or in the Eurasian space. Currently, Russian officials celebrate their rising partnership with Beijing. Not only have territorial disputes been successfully resolved, but both countries have consolidated their cooperation in the energy sector and in the security realm. Russia hopes to decrease its dependence on European markets — and, along with that, the risk of being sanctioned for its political actions — in part through the \$400 billion gas deal signed with China in 2014,⁷⁰ and to re-orient itself toward Asian markets.

Moscow's willingness to reopen discussions with Japan over the Kuril Islands in order to secure its economic cooperation with Tokyo⁷¹ is another long-term strategy that is part of this general trend of "turning East." In the security realm, Russia and China have been able to accommodate each other in Central Asia through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Joint military exercises, organized for the first time in a bilateral manner in 2005, took a geopolitical turn in 2014 with a joint naval drill in East China Sea.⁷² This sent a deterrence message to Japan and the United States, and implied Russia's support for China's claims in South and East China Sea. However, China, a client of Soviet Russia for weapons and military equipment for decades, is expected to become autonomous from its Russian military tutor and could even become a competitor in the international arms market.

Beijing and Moscow follow similar interpretations of the Chechen question in Russia and the Tibetan and Uyghur issues in China, but Moscow's recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in August 2008, followed by the Ukrainian crisis, caused confusion among Chinese authorities. Very sensitive to the impossibility of finding a peaceful solution to the Tibetan and Uyghur issues, Beijing continues to speak only of economic development as a driver of political stability, and carefully avoids any topic that would promote a secessionist agenda, contrary to the Russian approach.

Beijing's policy has thus been to dissociate itself from Moscow's actions without legally condemning them or applying sanctions.⁷³ Aside from these disagreements, both countries share a relatively similar reading of the international world order, denouncing what they interpret as U.S. unilateralism. They regularly veto U.S. and European decisions at the UN Security Council, and especially veto resolutions condemning the Syrian regime. Both countries hope to undermine or even overthrow U.S. structural domination of the international scene, arguing for the creation of new rules that take into consideration the interests of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa).

The Russia-China alliance appears above all to be a marriage of mutual strategic interests. Over the long term, it is difficult not to imagine Russia's feeling threatened by China's multidimensional rise, including the demographic imbalance in the Far East, and Russian policymakers will probably be increasingly concerned at the speed with which China is narrowing the strategic gap.⁷⁴ But for the time being, both countries share a compatible agenda and have been able to accommodate each other.

How does this partnership relate to the Russian World concept? China advances a very modest cultural diplomacy agenda in Eurasia. It has opened Confucius Institutes in Russia, Ukraine, Central Asia, and South Caucasus, to offer classes in Chinese language, and puts forward a growing number of stipends and fellowships for SCO citizens. But its promotion of “Chineseness” (*zhonghuaxing*) will probably remain limited in coming years, given Russians’ and Central Asians’ demographic fears and their distrust of long-term Chinese interests in the region.

Russia’s resilience on the international scene brings admiration from Beijing,⁷⁵ and the latter expressed its readiness to throw a financial lifeline to Russia if the current economic crisis and Western sanctions truly put the Russian economy in danger. Although the economic and demographic imbalance between the two countries plays into China’s favor, Russia is still ahead in terms of its readiness for geopolitical confrontation with the U.S., while China prefers to bide its time and avoid direct confrontation by limiting competition to the trade and economic domains, and the financial one. The Russia-China partnership to hamper U.S. domination seems related mostly to the Eurasian project as opposed to the Russian World. Sergey Glazyev, the presidential aide for the Eurasian Union project, is one of the strongest supporters of an anti-dollar alliance, and a fervent partisan for the BRICS to leave the purely economic domain in order to penetrate geopolitics.⁷⁶

Russian views that challenge the current international order are an integral part of the Russian World in its original conception, promoting a specific Russian voice in the world. In this strategy, Russia

Challenging the current international order is integral to the Russian World, and for this Russia needs powerful allies.

cannot go it alone, and needs powerful allies. China ranks first among these allies because of its status as a future great power of the 21st century, even as few in the Kremlin are willing to predict what form this alliance will take in the coming half-century, especially with Russia diminished in its demographic and economic capabilities. More importantly, Russia does not have a coherent doctrine for this new world order; it is only an implicit part of the Russian World. Finally, Russia and China may share the same agenda toward U.S. unilateralism, but their approaches on how to undermine it are significantly divergent. Russia is more confrontational and pursues a more immediate agenda, while China tries to play according to the rules of the game, in the hopes that the rules will change naturally in the medium term once the balance of power falls in Beijing’s favor.

Promoting the Kremlin’s Conservative Agenda

Although the Russian World concept is poorly articulated vis-à-vis the Eurasian project and the partnership with China, it functions in almost complete harmony with the Kremlin’s new conservative agenda. Both repertoires advance the idea or assumption that Russia represents a unique civilization. Civilizational discourse has been very successful in Russia since the early 1990s, and has been often wielded by nationalist groups in response to the political, cultural, and economic “Westernization” of the country. Two groups in particular have carried this civilizational narrative: the Moscow Patriarchate, which has imbued this civilization framework with religious references to Russia as an Orthodox civilization, and the neo-Eurasianists, who have used geopolitical rationales to define Russia as a Eurasian civilization.

Both trends have at times been pushed closer together by a Soviet-nostalgic narrative about Russia as a unique civilization that was both Orthodox and Eurasian; this is the main line promoted by Russian nationalist Alexander Prokhanov and Gennady Zyuganov’s Communist Party.

But it was not until 2008 that the Russian state took on this terminology. The foreign policy concept that year mentioned that for “the first time in contemporary history, global competition is acquiring a civilizational dimension which suggests competition between different value systems and development models within the framework of universal democratic and market economy principles.”⁷⁷ Since then, the civilization terminology has become more pervasive in Russian official language, but the boundaries of this civilization remain vague.

On several occasions, Russian officials have openly and unequivocally supported the thesis of Russia’s essentially European nature, and Foreign Minister Lavrov once defined Europe, the United States, and the Russian Federation as “the three pillars and three branches of European civilization.”⁷⁸ By contrast, Putin’s declaration of candidacy to the presidency in early 2012 seemed to emphasize the Eurasian nature of Russia’s civilization when he stated, “Russia can and must play a deserving role, dictated by its civilizational model, great history, geography, and its cultural genome, which seamlessly combines the fundamentals of European civilization and the centuries-old experience of cooperation with the East, where new centers of economic power and political influence are currently rapidly developing.”⁷⁹

Although the geography of Russia as a civilization remains imprecise, the contents of this civilization are clearly rooted in conservative values. The frequency of the term “morality” (*pravostennost*) and of the adjective “spiritual” (*dukhovnyi*) in Putin’s speeches has increased in recent years, especially since his return to the presidency in 2012.⁸⁰ The Kremlin understands morality as respect for “traditional” values: the heterosexual family (non-recognition of LGBT rights); an emphasis on having children as a basis for individual life but also for the country’s demographic health; the fight against alcoholism; and respect for the elderly and for hierarchy. This has been put into practice in a series of new laws, or draft laws, since 2012, including the law against so-called gay propaganda, the anti-blasphemy law in response to the Pussy Riot trial, the Internet restriction bill in the name of child protection, the ban on obscene language in movies, books, and music, and others. In addition, there have been new state policies granting financial benefits to families with two or more children, new draft laws to limit abortion, and numerous PR campaigns to promote healthier lifestyles.

The ‘Russian civilization’ has ambiguous boundaries, but clearly conservative values.

The same institutions and flagship figures find themselves behind both the Russian World concept and the claim of Russia’s conservative civilization. Among the most important are: clerical doctrinaires surrounding Patriarch Kirill, in particular Vsevolod Chaplin, head of the Synodal Department for Church and Society Relations, as well as Hilarion Alfeyev, head of the Synodal Department of External Relations; the so-called “Orthodox businessmen” such as Vladimir Yakunin, Putin’s close associate and head of the Russian Railways state company, and Konstantin Malofeev and his St. Basil the Great Foundation; the circle of anti-abortion campaigners, including senior officials such as Yelena Mizulina, head of the Duma Committee on Family, Women and Children’s Affairs; and several politicians such

as Natalia Narochnitskaya, whose narrative articulates precisely the Russian World concept and the conservative agenda.

As stated by Boris Mezhuev, Russia wants to integrate into Europe, but a conservative Europe. “If the Russian world wins, the European family would likely offer a place — possibly the pride of place — to a new and better Russia, with its large population consisting of many ethnic groups. If the Atlantic wins, we would live in a world described in the dystopian novels by Aldous Huxley and Anthony Burgess — a debilitated, hedonistic society, one oblivious of the values of homeland, family and God.”⁸¹

The narrative about Russia as a conservative civilization is accompanied by an active geopolitics that joins the soft-power networks of the Russian World. Again, the Orthodox Church is one of its driving forces. The Patriarchate is engaged in an intense dialogue abroad. Russia’s attempt to pose as the standard bearer of the traditional family has been warmly received by Catholic churches and the Holy See, and has also opened up a new line of communication with the U.S. radical right.⁸² This conservative geopolitics would have reached its apogee in October 2014 with the holding of the World Congress of Families in Moscow, presented as the “Olympics of the Pro-Life Movement,” but the Congress was cancelled following the Ukrainian crisis.

In Europe, Russia’s religion-based networks almost entirely overlap with the political groups supporting Russia, mostly located at the far-right spectrum of European politics. Russia’s voice in Europe is represented by a broad coalition that includes the French National Front, Forza Italia, Silvio Berlusconi’s party in Italy, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Catholic-monarchist Carlist movement in Spain, the Hungarian Jobbik party, the Greek Golden Dawn party and the Bulgarian Ataka party, through to the British National Party (BNP) and the German *Zuerst* journal.⁸³ Proponents of Russian conservatism and members of the European far-right share a similar agenda: they call on the “periphery” to resist the “system,” denounce economic and political liberalism, individualism, the European Union “technocracy,” the destruction of so-called traditional values, and the imposition of external cultural standards.

CONCLUSIONS

It would be a mistake to analyze the Russian World concept as something unique that only Russia would have developed, with no other models for comparison. The notion of Francophonie is similar in many respects to the Russian World and relies on the same ambivalence. It is founded on a linguistic concept (French speakers), is associated with a national cultural heritage and has political ramifications for the defense of a “French vision” or “French voice” in the international arena, visible for instance in Paris’ position against the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. It also serves to justify opaque post-colonial policies, such as “French Africa” of the 1960-70s, and to maintain even today obscure networks that defend French commercial interests and local elites in the region.

The French case is exemplary in its comparison to the Russian one because of the areas of overlap: both cases involve a language spoken outside the country’s borders (French is spoken in Switzerland, Belgium, Quebec and some African countries), a language that is a cultural export (250 million people speak French around the world), a public diplomacy that supports Paris’ decisions and France’s international visibility, and a colonial heritage maintained for political and financial reasons. A parallel between the Russian World and the British Commonwealth could be drawn as well.

The Russian World concept can also be compared to U.S. public diplomacy, and it seems obvious that Russia explicitly mirrors many U.S. policies in terms of building its own NGO diplomacy and media presence. The Russian World notion and its still-reluctant shift from promoting something that is Russia-centric (Russian minorities abroad) to advancing a values-based agenda can be understood as following the established traditions of U.S. public diplomacy. The latter combines loyalty to the founding values of American democracy and promotion of these values abroad via a dense network of NGOs that, although technically independent from the state, have many financial and human links to it. Finally, it is in the name of a certain interpretation of these values that the U.S. government can decide whether to use its military to assist countries, regimes, or allied groups. As seen from the point of view of Russian authorities, Russia is doing nothing more than replicating this public diplomacy in the defense of what it sees as its own national interests.

The Russian World can be compared to French, British, and U.S. public diplomacy efforts.

What might be the fate of the Russian World concept? In all its definitions, the Russian World is not ethnic but encompasses the Soviet legacy, the Russian-speaking world, and Russia’s fellow travelers. If one associates it with Russia’s ability to build its own information space, then the concept has been largely

successful, although it is based increasingly on coercive tools, which are more difficult to maintain in the long run. If one associates the Russian World to Russia's ability to promote an alternative economic and financial model in response to the West's world order, based on the Eurasian Union project and the partnership with the BRICS and China, then the concept has been less triumphant.

Could the concept be abandoned quickly, or is this a long-term project that will shape Russia's position in the world and in its Near Abroad for decades to come? At present, its future is uncertain. As any other great power, Russia will continue to be preoccupied by changes in its neighborhood, and will continue to project there part of its cultural identity in support of strategic interests, especially if the Eurasian project fails and neighboring countries begin to distance themselves from Moscow. Soft power is developed in order to avoid having to use hard power, but it can also be articulated along with it, precede it, or justify it. The Russian World concept does not depart from this ambiguity, and it has been used to justify the annexation of Crimea. Putin advanced many legitimizing points for the annexation: geopolitical (the possibility of NATO advancing into a region where the main Russian fleet is stationed), historical (Crimea and Sevastopol are a part of Russia's past), and ethnic, by reminding that "the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders."⁸⁴ Russia's *soft* power in the Near Abroad can thus become *hard*.

However, demographically the Russian World is destined to decline. Millions of Russians or people who self-identify with Russia have returned to Russia, and those who remain elsewhere are progressively assimilating into their new citizenships, especially in countries near Europe. The Russians of the Near Abroad are also in the process of demographic aging, particularly in the Central Asian and South-Caucasian countries, where titular nations have higher birth rates. It is therefore difficult to predict how many people will still identify as Russian in the Near Abroad by mid-century. The diasporas of the so-called Far Abroad, particularly in Western countries, are not necessarily on track to diminish, because they have preserved their cultural identities and regularly benefit from new waves of immigration. Like the vast majority of diasporas, it is natural to assume that they will be favorable to dialogue with the homeland, but they may not want to turn politically to Moscow, limiting themselves instead to historical and cultural affiliations.

The real challenge for the survival of the Russian World concept is thus not in the future of Russian minorities abroad, but in Russia's ability to structure its "voice" in the world. How to move away from

Russia's main challenge will be to structure its 'voice' in the world.

has displayed a volatile combination of marketing strategies and PR branding, similar to those elaborated by many countries in the world, as well as soft power tools such as mastering media, and a kind of messianism. Some scholars state that "Russian policies (of public diplomacy) have only borrowed Soviet tactics and lack all the ideological contents of Soviet policies."⁸⁵ I disagree and consider that Russia has progressively injected substance into its public diplomacy, and today this ideologization has become noticeable and tangible. The Kremlin's turn toward a conservative ideology offers a new playground for the Russian World concept, giving it some depth of content, especially toward Europe.

So far, Moscow has not demonstrated its ability to elaborate a structured doctrine legitimizing this Russian voice and its path of development, and has failed to adopt policies that can be both successful, sustainable and non-coercive. However, whatever its interpretation, the Russian World is not meant to be a rigid doctrine. Its fuzziness and elasticity are key elements of its functionality: it is a geopolitical trope, a floating empty signifier open to all kinds of re-branding and re-articulation. It is not a tool for Russia to retreat into itself, but a path of dialogue with the world. It could therefore develop other maps of meaning, which could make it less confrontational to the sensibilities of some of Russia's neighbors and push the Kremlin to negotiate more smoothly Russia's status in Europe and the world.

NOTES

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