

Russian Civilizationism at the Turn of a New Decade: The Case of Academia

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ON 17 May 2020, the television channel Russia-1 aired a short interview with Vladimir Putin, where he stressed the need to use new technology, genetics and artificial intelligence included, in order to preserve and protect Russia. Furthermore, Putin connected the capability for technological innovation to Russia's position as a "separate civilization" of numerous ancient traditions: Россия—это не просто страна, это действительно отдельная цивилизация: это многонациональная страна с большим количеством традиций, культур, вероисповеданий (Russia.tv 2020).¹

The interview was aired as part of the weekly program "Moscow. Kremlin. Putin," which that evening focused on the development of national industry (aircraft construction in particular). However, the interview was actually made eight months earlier, in September 2019. Remarking on this use of stored-up material, commentator Ilya Klishin described it as an example of "canned goods" or "preserves," which "has become a familiar part of Russia's postmodern political landscape." The decision to air this interview at this moment, with the president describing Russia as a "separate civilization," Klishin explains, was to assure Russian citizens that the state will protect them in the coronavirus situation. While characterizing Russian authorities in quite cynical terms, Klishin admitted that Russian society is not opposed to ideas about the country's alleged uniqueness:

1 "Russia is not only a country, it is a separate civilization; it is a multinational country with a great number of traditions, cultures, confessions."

It is important to note that even if the average Russian understands that the authorities are “going heavy on the patriotism” and filling the airwaves with empty statements about a “distinct civilization,” it does not mean that people basically disagree with that idea. (Klishin 2020)

Klishin’s remark suggests that the Kremlin is currently putting into circulation ideas that, however instrumentally they are used, also resonate with perceptions actively held by a broader public. In this chapter I pursue this idea of a resonance between the authorities and society in Russia, or what Samuel Greene and Graeme Robertson have conceptualized as the *co-construction* of power under Putin. While the current regime is authoritarian, it also derives legitimacy from popular support. At the same time, “Putin’s reliance on popular support also makes him vulnerable” (Greene & Robertson 2019, 13), since such support may disappear. As Viacheslav Morozov and Elena Pavlova have recently argued, even in contemporary Russia, with its presumably conservative two-third majority and the pressure of the Kremlin’s authoritarianism, propaganda and manipulation, there is an “ever-existing possibility of alternative hegemonic articulations” (Morozov & Pavlova 2020, 7).² They find their hypothesis confirmed by contemporary Russian women’s popular fiction, whose discourse ranges from the traditionalist and patriotic to the Eurocentric and oppositional.

Approaching Civilizationism

Scholars emphasize from time to time the pragmatic, non-ideological nature of the Putin regime. Victor Shnirelman, for one, argues that “Putin uses the notion of ‘civilization’ instrumentally to justify particular interests” (Shnirelman 2020, 73). “Interests” here mean above all state interests, without a deeper conceptual fundament. However, despite the inconsistencies that Shnirelman meticulously documents, I do not necessarily subscribe to the view that the Kremlin’s talk about Russia as a “separate civilization” is empty (cf. Klishin), if such a statement is taken to mean that the people in power do not believe in it or use it just cynically to remain in power, or that it has no meaning at all. As for Putin himself

2 The relatively persistent support of Putin by two-thirds of Russian society is regularly documented by the Levada Centre, as also referenced in Morozov and Pavlova’s article (Levada Centre n.d.).

he has explicitly connected the idea of civilization to the Russian state and there is little doubt that the current president strongly identifies with Russia precisely as a state, an idea he has returned to over and over again since he took over as president in late 1999 (Putin 1999).³ “Civilization” for Putin is a means to positively articulate Russia’s imperial legacy and multinational character—within a unified state. As for society and the broader public, however, the appeal of “civilization,” which is a concept of multiple meanings indeed, may be connected to Russia, and even to the Russian state, but it may also take on other meanings. The aim of this chapter is to explore further the multiple meanings and trajectories of society’s response.

Citing the sociologist Lev Gudkov, Greene and Robertson argue that the current consensus supporting the current regime is maintained in a wide range of institutions: the military, schools, church, and of course media (Greene and Robertson 2019, 210–211). My analysis below will explore another venue that contributes to this consensus: academia. Surely, academic institutions may not be as instrumental as those mentioned above in fostering patriotism. Contemporary Russian academia is also an arena for critical debate and even opposition, and more generally a too heterogeneous phenomenon to make simple generalizations about, consisting as it does of traditional Soviet institutions alongside those that evolved later, from above as well as from below.⁴ Nevertheless, a significant part of Russian academia, be it individual members or entire institutions, has for a long time been a producer of patriotic sentiment. It both draws on official rhetoric and has been a source for it. Arguably, it provides an illustrative example of what Greene and Robertson describe as the co-construction of power.⁵

3 Putin’s statism has been explored by numerous scholars over the last two decades, and there is a widely shared consensus that this makes up the core of “Putinism.” See for instance Taylor (2018).

4 It should be noted that academic freedom in Russia has recently experienced some setbacks. During 2020 the Higher School of Economics took measures to limit political activism among students and staff, the background being the 2019 protests against election fraud in Moscow (Kaczmarska & Dubrovsky 2020). In October local prosecutors required the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration to report student and staff participation in demonstrations as well as their foreign contacts, including “pro-American groups of influence” (Human Rights Watch 2020). The attempt was later disavowed.

5 On academia as a producer of regime-supporting ideas, see Suslov & Kotkina (2020),

In the following, I examine recent Russian articulations of *civilizationism* in a sphere situated outside and yet in several ways related to state power.⁶ How is the meaning of civilization negotiated in academic discourse, as exemplified by the activities of two major institutions, which I analyse below? What I am particularly interested in is the interaction with official ideologemes, or the key units of discourse,⁷ which in my understanding corresponds to what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) conceptualize as the *nodal points* of discourse, that is particular concepts (or “moments”) that gain a privileged status in relation to other concepts. The goal of the discursive process as described by Laclau and Mouffe is the fixation of meaning by creating and connecting such nodal points. However, as they point out, “every nodal point is constituted within an intertextuality that overflows it” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 100). This is a precondition for articulation, and it is their view that a full closure of meaning, without any ambiguity, cannot really be achieved, though the articulatory practices seek to do so.

It should be noted that there exists a variety of civilizationisms in contemporary Russia, which are partially overlapping. As for articulations by elite groups (politicians, public intellectuals), the most important ideas are those of Russia as a separate civilization, as in the quote from Putin presented at the outset and in the material examined below, and of Russia as the truly European civilization defending “traditional Christian values.”⁸ Civilizational thinking entered Russian debates before contemporary populism (cf. Brubaker 2017) and even before Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis, though it was significantly influenced by it, having first been shaped by the ideas of Nikolai Danilevskii, Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. Indeed, the division of the world into separate, distinct civilizations, often for ideological rather than scholarly purposes (Horovun 2016), was evoked in response to the late-

who analyse civilizational rhetoric in doctoral dissertations of the past 20 years.

6 “Civilizationism” is adopted from Brubaker (2017). Brubaker focuses in particular on contemporary right-wing populism and its ideas about “identitarian Christianity” as a community broader and yet complementary to the nation. In the case of Russia, however, civilization and nation are widely associated with one another.

7 For a discussion of “ideologeme,” see Turoma & Mjør (2020).

8 For the second type, which is more recent, see Engström (2014; 2020), Laruelle (2016), Riabova (2020), Zvereva (2020). These two understandings are inconsistently pursued by the very same actors—Putin included.

and early post-Soviet changes (Turoma & Mjør 2020). Yet it entered a new stage during Putin's third presidency, a period known also for its conservative turn. Having earlier been promoted by public intellectuals and politicians of various factions, by the Russian Orthodox Church, and by new post-Soviet academic disciplines, most notably culture studies (*kul'turologiia*, Scherrer 2003) but also "geopolitics" (cf. Suslov 2013) and "politology," civilizationism has during the last decade become a vocal part of official rhetoric. The official turn to civilizationism came to expression in Vladimir Putin's texts and speeches of 2012–2013, and has subsequently been applied as a framework in several policy documents and law initiatives related to foreign policy (2013, see Linde 2016) and to cultural policy (2014, see Turoma & Mjør 2020).

By implication, the notion of Russia as forming a civilization of its own has been actively adopted by the authorities from various segments of society. Particularly illuminating is the concept of a "state-civilization" (*gosudarstvo-tsvilizatsiia*), which had been coined some years prior to the Kremlin's appropriation (cf. Putin 2012) by conservative figures such as Mikhail Leont'ev and Mikhail Remizov (see Mjør 2018). Below I will examine this concept as a case of how civilizationism during the last decade has been *returning* to society, that is, how society, as exemplified by two departments at Moscow State University and the Russian Academy of Sciences, has responded to the authorities' appropriation of civilizational rhetoric.

The Panarin Readings (Moscow State University)

Aleksandr Panarin (1940–2003) was professor of political philosophy at Moscow State University. Having been a dissident in the late Soviet Union and a proponent of liberalism during perestroika and the early 1990s, he gradually shifted position as he witnessed the results of the reforms as well as Russia's reduced standing internationally. He emerged as a fierce critic of globalization and Westernization, seeing them as processes leading to poverty and to loss of diversity and cultural identity, and turning Russia into a devastated "fourth world." At the same time, he formulated a utopian vision for how diversity and identity could be restored. This would be a global struggle where Russia—for him the most apparent victim of globalization—would take the lead in a spiritual revolt. He grounded his claim in recent experiences of globalization, in Russia's

cultural heritage as a multi-ethnic and yet Orthodox civilization and in ideas of compassion and altruism as formulated by Russian thinkers of the past (Panarin 2002). Thus, while rejecting Western claims to universalism, which were rather expressions of Western particularism, Panarin proposed another idea of true universalism and pluralism, for which Russia and its civilization—its experiences and hidden potential—was the best model available. Russia's mission was to preserve its own, true identity and represent a prototype for others.

Panarin passed away in 2003, and the conference series “Panarin readings” has been arranged annually since 2004 with the aim of preserving his legacy. The last conference by the time of writing this chapter was held at Moscow State University in November 2019 on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Nikolai Danilevskii's book *Russia and Europe* (1869), the title being “Russia and Europe: Common Destiny and Alternative Projects of Civilizational Developments.” Proceedings are regularly published as separate volumes. For the last years, the main organizer has been the Department of the Philosophy of Politics and Law at the Philosophical Faculty of Moscow State University, in collaboration with the Likhachev Research Institute for Cultural and Natural Heritage and Moscow State Linguistic University, but the readings also involve collaboration with a wide range of partners—from the political party Just Russia (its leader Sergei Mironov is a regular speaker at the conferences) via the Academy of Sciences' Council for the Study and Preservation of Cultural and Natural Heritage to the World Russian People's Council of the Russian Orthodox Church. The two central figures, judging from the last decade's conferences and publications, have been Valerii Rastorguev and Evgenii Chelyshev. Chelyshev, who passed away in July 2020, had been a high-ranking academic (Indologist and scholar of literary and cultural studies) in the Soviet and post-Soviet system, as well as a veteran and public figure. Since 1992 he was the leader of the Academy of Sciences' Scientific Council for Cultural and Natural Heritage, and since 2012 of the research programme “Russia's Civilizational Path” (RAN 2016).⁹

9 The programme “Russia's Civilizational Path” has been a collaboration between the Academy of Sciences and the World Russian People's Council of the Russian Orthodox Church. A recent collective monograph summing up the project—*Russia's Civilizational Development: Heritage, Potential, Perspectives* (Chereshnev & Rastorguev 2018)—generally shares the same features as those encountered in other publications discussed in this chapter, but identifies civilization first and foremost with confes-

The first proceedings that were published after the Kremlin's decisive turn to civilizationism was the book *Russia's Civilizational Mission* (Rastorguev 2014), which is based on the ninth readings in 2012/2013 (the volume confusingly gives both years). In general the concept of "mission" figures prominently in the civilizational discourse without necessarily being defined, but its meaning as it appears from this volume, for instance according to the papers by Vladimir Mironov (2014) and Sergei Mironov (2014), is to meet the challenges of globalization by maintaining the alleged Russian tradition of a peaceful building of a multinational state as a sound alternative to them. For Sergei Mironov, Russia's "mission" is the unification of peoples—it is both an idea promoted by philosophers of the past as an ideal and an alleged fact of Russian imperial history. In the civilizational discourse, thus, the Soviet notion of Russian history as the "friendship of peoples" has re-emerged as an ideologeme, in particular after Putin's text on the national question (2012).¹⁰ Sergei Mironov (2014, 22) favourably approves of Putin's use of "state-civilization," claiming that this "new language" gives more place for culture and humanitarian ideas and not just the state. Mironov and his Just Russia are a central part of Russia's loyal, "systemic opposition" (Reuter 2019, 48), and he clearly approves of Putin's ideas, while emphasizing the need for a vital society in Russia and not just a strong state.

An even clearer reflection of official ideas can be found in the proceedings from the tenth Panarin readings that took place in 2015, which bear the very title *Russia as a State-Civilization* (Rastorguev ed. 2016). Chelyshev's contribution (2016) focuses on the need for new kinds of self-articulation in shifting and unstable times, for which the concept of "state-civilization" comes in neatly. Chelyshev claims that it places Russia in the same category as China, India, Japan and Iran, an idea that during the last decade has been frequently articulated in the civilizational discourse, where these civilizations figure as the warrant of cultural diversity. A "state-civilization" is, for Chelyshev, defined by a common faith, a strong state and a common linguistic space ("the Russian World"); the

sion, not state (Chereshnev & Rastorguev 2018, 24).

10 Prior to Putin's text on the "national question" the theme of Russia's multi-ethnicity featured prominently in public discourse, for instance in Tikhon Shevkunov's popular TV film *The Fall of an Empire: Lessons from Byzantium* and Maksim Shevchenko's journalism (Yablokov 2018, 42, 97).

latter being a central topic in Chelyshev's writings, which often focus on the threat of disintegration posed by smaller languages gaining rights. As for confessions, Russia possesses an Orthodox identity while still being "tolerant" vis-à-vis other confessions within this civilization. Again we encounter the dissemination of an idealized, harmonious understanding of Russian imperial history as diversity in unity, which dates back to late imperial and Soviet history but is hereby recast in the civilizational language.

Rastorguev's chapter in *Russia as a State-Civilization*, too, opens with a definition of "state-civilization," which shares major similarities with that of Chelyshev. For Rastorguev the term is particularly applicable to Russia due to its size ("the largest country in the world"), its resources, ethnic diversity and unique experiences of handling this diversity in a peaceful manner. For Rastorguev the "mission" is simply to be a civilization, a "predetermination" that seems to be related to geography through his use of Lev Gumilev's concept of "niche," which refers to the interaction of an ethnic group with its natural surroundings (Rastorguev 2016, 50). What Rastorguev's chapter in particular illustrates, however, is the ways in which it puts on display the production of civilizational discourse as a means to itself. In his conclusion, he reminds his readers that the Panarin readings, which are devoted to the civilization theme, aim at recognizing Russia's civilizational mission and thus preserving it as a civilization. In other words, to talk about Russia as a civilization becomes a way to maintaining it as such. Moreover, Rastorguev stresses some key methodological principles in this respect, the central being to focus on unity: of nature and culture; state and religion; language and values (Rastorguev 2018, 71–72). But unity is in this context necessarily an assumption, not a finding, and hence a discursive product. Rastorguev's text thus becomes a neat example of academic research as the production of discourse in terms of the combination of nodal points (concepts, ideas): state, geography, culture, religion—all of which are understood as a unity, while unity is taken to mean that it is a civilization.

Likewise, in the foreword to the last volume of proceedings from the Panarin readings so far, Rastorguev states that what unites all contributions to the readings is precisely the civilizational approach. For him this is a source of optimism, since this paradigm is otherwise repudiated among analysts. Rastorguev frames the project he conducts as a discursive

sive struggle, that is, as a struggle to make a particular perspective hegemonic (Rastorguev 2018, 7–8).

Ironically, however, the understanding of Russia as a civilization encountered in these volumes is hardly ever based on new research but, at best, on a small selection of accounts produced in historically different situations and contexts, to which they responded. Although references are generally few, the foundational text in the material examined here is Nikolai Danilevskii's *Russia and Europe* (see e.g. Rastorguev 2016; Chereshevnev & Rastorguev 2018). What is noteworthy in this respect is not only that this is a speculative work which was written in an already then outdated biological language (and which these contemporary scholars unequivocally accept as *nauka*), but also that it is a work that so clearly bears the marks of the age of reform (abolition of serfdom, local governance) in which it was written. Russian-Slavic civilization was for Danilevskii not a historical fact, not a “heritage,” but a project for the future. While he saw Russia as “predetermined” to accomplish it, the project was also dependent on agency (Mjør 2016), and this is mostly absent in contemporary treatments of Danilevskii,¹¹ which sees “mission” in terms of preservation of an imaginary past only. In Rastorguev's own defence of the civilizational approach, which is formulated in the political language of Putin's Russia, Danilevskii's model enables the preservation of cultural heritage and national sovereignty (Rastorguev 2018, 18).¹²

The Russian Project of Civilizational Development (Academy of Sciences)

Two other contributors to the 2016 *Russia as a State-Civilization* volume discussed above were Valeriia Spiridonova and Rimma Sokolova, affiliated with the Department of the Philosophical Problems of Politics, which belongs to the Institute of Philosophy, Russian Academy of Sciences. And actually, in the same year of 2016 they too published an academic work by the same title—*Russia as a State-Civilization*, a collective monograph co-authored with Vladimir Shevchenko. 2016 was also the year when “The Russian Project of Civilizational Development” was

11 For an exception, see Smirnov (2019, 116–50), who emphasizes that Danilevskii's Slavic civilization belonged to the future. However, he fully accepts Danilevskii's civilizational division of the world, including its firm border between Russia and the West and the impossibility of adopting foreign cultural models.

12 On sovereignty and its role in contemporary Russia's political discourse, see Jardar Østbø's contribution to this volume.

accepted by the Scientific-Coordinating Council of the Federal Agency of Scientific Organizations (FANO).¹³ It is currently one of the Institute of Philosophy's "plan themes" (Institut filosofii RAN 2019c) and is directed by the Institute's director, Andrei Smirnov, who is also head of the Department for the Philosophy of the Islamic World, president of the Russian Philosophical Society and primarily a specialist in Arabic-Muslim philosophy. The book by Spiridonova, Sokolova and Shevchenko, *Russia as a State-Civilization*, arguably formulates a set of premises for the project. Except perhaps for the cover illustration—a photo of the nuclear-powered icebreaker *Russia*—it is a typical RAN publication in terms of design and low print-run. Still, as also increasingly characteristic of Russian academic publications it is openly accessible on the institute's website and has a potentially broad outreach.

The introduction written by Shevchenko demonstrates a quite manifest fusion of political and academic prose. The fall of the Soviet Union, we read, led to the hegemony of *one* ideology—Western liberalism—which left Russia uncertain of its own identity. At present, however, Russia has entered a new stage: It is no longer a "state controlled by the West" and is currently "gaining political independence" (Spiridonova, Sokolova & Shevchenko 2016, 7). "Independence" means to regain its role as a "state-civilization," which is repeatedly opposed to "nation-state." While the nation-state is seen as a "Western" concept that was imposed on Russia in the 1990s and threatened its sovereignty, "state-civilization" stands for Russia's quintessential nature. "State-civilization" legitimizes Russia's imperial legacy and places it on a par with China and India. Thus, the book sustains the othering of the West so characteristic of Russian identity formation since the 19th century at least, while actively identifying Russia with other non-Western countries, which is a more recent phenomenon in this respect.

The language encountered in this and similar publications often has a ritualized and even redundant character, where it for instance is highly unclear whether it was the state that created Russian civilization or the other way around. This tendency testifies to the performative character (cf. Yurchak 2006) of ideologized discourse, where the production

13 See Biotekh2030 (2016). The original web page of FANO no longer exists; in 2018, FANO was closed down and its activity was taken over by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation.

of civilizational talk appears as a means to itself, at the expense of historical references. However, Russian academic prose that explicitly supports current Russian politics does not merely reproduce its language. Sokolova's chapter, which takes issue with the challenges of globalization, places quotations from Putin in the context of other Russian thinkers from Nikolai Danilevskii (whose ideas she actually compares to Putin's) to Mikhail Remizov. She is particularly concerned with what Russian thought (*otechestvennaia mysl'*) has to offer to the conceptualization of Russia as (state-) civilization and how it may serve as a weapon to counter globalization and defend Russia's own interests. While Sokolova's writing is on the one hand informed by official ideologemes such as the Russian nation and culture being the "core" (*sterzhen*) of Russian civilization (cf Putin 2012),¹⁴ the "power vertical," "unity" and Russia's "thousand-year experience" (cf. Mjør 2020), she combines them with notions developed in the history of Russian thought, such as Gumilev's "behavioral stereotype," and classical Eurasianism's "ideocracy" (Spiridonova, Sokolova & Shevchenko 2016, 45–55). Similar to Rastorguev above, Sokolova provides additional ideas and concepts which in this particular case hardly challenge the hegemonic discourse but which may or may not be approved by other producers, in a context where to supply official, conservative ideology with ideas and references from the history of Russian thought during the last decade has been a central effort of several think tanks (cf. Laruelle 2016, 288–89).

In other cases, however, we encounter perspectives that more explicitly challenge official articulations. In the course of 2019 and first half of 2020 the Institute of Philosophy organized three conferences; the first two were entitled "Philosophy and the Civilizational Future of Russia" (May, November 2019), while the third bore the title "The Civilizational Development of Contemporary Russia: A Philosophical Perspective" (June, 2020).¹⁵ The last conference, which due to the coronavirus situation was an online event without any discussion after the paper presenta-

14 In formulations like these, "Russian civilization" is normally *rossiiskaia*, while "Russian culture / nation" is *russkaia*. Sokolova, still, uses the rather uncommon *russko-rossiiskaia tsivilizatsiia*, which I take to mean a multi-ethnic state-civilization forged by the ethnically Russian people (Spiridonova, Sokolova and Shevchenko 2016, 54).

15 All are available on YouTube, though not in their entirety due to technical issues (Institut filosofii RAN 2019a, 2019b, 2020).

tions, illustrates their heterogeneous character, without questioning the civilizational approach as such.

Shevchenko's talk "Russia returns to itself: The problem of choosing a civilizational future," which opened the second conference, was very much swept in the official discourse. According to Shevchenko, we are currently proceeding from a unipolar to a multipolar world; whereby Russia is liberating itself from its former "neo-colonial dependency" on the West, rediscovering its own cultural heritage and acquiring independence. Citing the interview Putin gave to the *Financial Times* in 2019, where he famously claimed that the "liberal idea has become obsolete," Shevchenko maintains that Western Europe is no longer worthy of imitation. Instead, Russia is currently articulating its "civilizational sovereignty."

Whereas this talk in November 2019 had a highly affirmative character and recycled several official ideologemes, Shevchenko's appearance at the conference in June 2020 took a somewhat different turn, despite a title very much in line with the main tendencies revealed so far: "Russia's Historical Mission and the Civilizational Project of the 21st Century." Russia's mission, according to Shevchenko, is internally to rely on its historical experience of creating an ethnically harmonious country, and externally, in foreign policy, to preserve multipolarity.¹⁶ He went on to cite the Just Russia programme (Sergei Mironov appeared at this conference as well, his talk being devoted to Russia's "separate path"), saying that culture is the fundament for state-building. However, he proceeded to accentuate необходимость преодоление разрыва между огромным духовным богатством русской культуры, культуры других народов страны и сравнительно бедным, недостроенным, далеко не совершенным характером русской цивилизации (Institut filosofii RAN 2020, 2:50:10).¹⁷ Alluding to a classical German/Spenglerian distinction between culture and civilization, Shevchenko made the claim that "Russian civilization" does by no means yet match "Russian culture." By "civilization" here Shevchenko obviously does not mean the "state-civi-

16 In 2018, the same author collective published a new collective monograph, devoted to the theme of "multipolarity" (Shevchenko, Spiridonova & Sokolova 2018).

17 "The necessity to overcome the rift between the enormous spiritual wealth of Russian culture, of the culture of the country's other peoples, and the relatively poor, unfulfilled, by far incomplete character of Russian civilization."

lization” (empire, multi-ethnic country etc.) but rather “civilized character,” the norms of behaviour in everyday life and so on. Shevchenko ended his talk by stressing the need for a civilizing mission to combat barbarism. In the end, civilization as used by Shevchenko came closer to what Norbert Elias has described as the civilizing process rather than a synonym for a mighty state.

Thus, despite his affirmation of official discourse (multi-ethnic unity, multipolar world), Shevchenko also implicitly challenged the belief in the absolute primacy of the state, known in Russian as *gosudarstvennichestvo*. Shevchenko clearly believes in the idea of Russian civilization but his talk disconnected it from the state. Rather, it cannot be realized without activating ideas articulated by past thinkers, representing “Russian culture.” A truly realized Russian civilization thus becomes a project for the future rather than the thousand-year-old state. Shevchenko was here in line with another speaker at the third conference (and regular contributor to the events and publications discussed in this chapter), Aleksei Kozyrev of Moscow State University. Asking what characterizes the “spirit of our times,” Kozyrev emphasized the heavy presence of “civil religion” at the expense of traditional Orthodoxy. “Civil religion” is for Kozyrev exemplified, among other things, by the new cathedral of the Russian armed forces that was opened on 22 June 2020 or the “immortal regiment” events. However, in Kozyrev’s view, these manifestations are not the true Orthodox tradition but its “simulacra” (Institut filosofii RAN 2020, 1:23;30).¹⁸ He concluded his talk by emphasizing the importance of intellectuals in order to defeat the “spirit of our times.” The implication here too was that Russian civilization remains a future project, for which it is essential to rediscover the real traditions, above all that of Russian thought, whose legacy Kozyrev described as more or less absent.

In general, the RAN project aims at showing the relevance of the Russian philosophical tradition (Slavophilism, Eurasianism and other currents) for Russia’s “civilizational development,” and as the papers by Kozyrev and Shevchenko aim to show, philosophy is indispensable in this respect. This brings us to the journal connected to this project, *Civilization Studies Review* (main editor: Shevchenko, two issues pub-

18 Another tendency characterizing the “spirit of our times” according to Kozyrev was the disintegrating impact of “multiculturalism”—which is very much in line with Putin (2012). See also Civstudies (2019).

lished so far), whose contributions mostly apply the civilizational approach to the history of ideas and religion in order to show the current relevance of past ideas, at times with explicit reference to the political vocabulary, for instance by emphasizing Russia's "civilizational sovereignty" (cf. Darenskii 2020, 50). The first issue was opened by a conversation between Shevchenko and Smirnov, and according to the latter, in Danilevskii "we possess an enormous resource of thought (*myslitel'nyi resurs*), on which we must build and should develop further" (Civstudies 2019, 13).

However, the journal is also open to critical perspectives, even on the "Russian project for civilizational development" itself. The article by Evgenii Tiugashev and Iurii Popkov (2020) criticizes the project's conceptual vagueness, inconsistencies and contradictions. They even point to an "eschatological flavor" (эсхатологический привкус) contained in it, while connecting the alleged need for a civilizational project to the "rotation and migration [after descending from power, КJM] of elites" (2020, 42), thus implicitly questioning the whole rationale of the project. They also criticize the harmonic understanding of Russian imperial history, which they argue should rather be understood as colonization. Finally, "Russian civilization" is for the authors not a separate civilization, but a typical borderland civilization (as are most civilizations) made up of various traditions: Orthodox, Eurasian, European, Slavic, ethnically Russian etc. They conclude by arguing that the project should rather focus on the "civilizational foundations" (in keeping with the understanding above) of Russian philosophy and explore Russia's place in world philosophy, instead of approaching it as an isolated project. They call for framing Russian thought as a contribution to what they conceptualize as "such 'cooperative' constructs as UN philosophy or UNESCO philosophy" (Tiugashev & Iurii Popkov 2020, 45) and hence to universal goals of sustainable development.

Tiugashev and Popkov conduct their discussion within a civilizational framework but otherwise question most of the assumptions shared and actively promoted by other contributors as discussed in this chapter. They make up a rare case in this context. The other examples discussed here are much more in conformity with the official view, meaning Putinist understandings of the Russian past and present as the history of a sovereign state-civilization (or empire) of a diverse and yet unified character.

Conclusions

Putin's statement aired in 2020 that Russia possesses "a great number of traditions, cultures, confessions"—and this was not the first time he uttered an idea like this—may be read as a call to excavate Russia's civilizational heritage. The projects discussed in this chapter are obvious examples of society's positive, affirmative responses to official ideology. As I have shown, they contribute to the reproduction of the hegemonic discourse in terms of rhetoric and themes (anti-globalization, anti-Westernism, defence of imperial legacy). However, even the apparently apologetic texts, while seeking to connect with official projects of state building and international positioning, retrieve from the past ideas that may support current political goals, but which are just as capable of casting a critical light on contemporary Russia.

Still, the question arises whether the firm belief in Russia as a "distinct civilization" that we witness in scholarly writing and academic segments is held by a broader public. A recent study of civilizational orientations among "ordinary people" (Hale & Laruelle 2020) suggests that this is not necessarily so. According to the study's data from 2013 and 2014, the belief that Russia is a *distinct civilization* is shared by one third of the Russian population, that is about half of those persistently supporting the current regime. Moreover, this assumption is unevenly shared across generations: "the older people are, the more likely they are to identify Russia as a distinct stand-alone civilization, while the younger they are, the more likely they are to identify Russian with European civilization" (Hale & Laruelle 2020, 595). In addition, gender plays a role: women are more likely to identify Russia with Europe than men are.

In Hale and Laruelle's view, their findings, where a majority demonstrates broader, more flexible civilizational identities than merely their own country, imply a rejection of the essentialist categories of "Huntingtonian primordialism." In my understanding of the usages they document, it is the identification of one's civilization as something broader than one's country that in particular demonstrates the non-essentialist character of civilizational belonging, while the more essentialist notion of a "Russian civilization" (though this too is always *rossiiskaia*) is merely one option among several, and perhaps also one that does not necessarily have a viable future.

Yet Hale and Laruelle too, when surveying the civilizational discourse of Russia's leadership, observe that the term "Russian civilization" has been increasingly used since 2013, "no longer primarily for comparison but now as a way of emphasizing that Russia has a distinct value system of its own" (Hale & Laruelle 2020, 591). Meanwhile, the case study carried out in this chapter has explored how academic segments, arguably conservative ones, have responded to the civilizationism of the conservative turn. Here we witness the positioning of Russia in opposition to the West and a corresponding identification with Eastern "state-civilizations." In light of Hale and Laruelle's study, this tendency is at odds with the beliefs of the broader public. In academic civilizationism we see few if any attempts to question the very idea of Russia as a separate civilization, or the analytical or political value of the concept. There are also few attempts to present Russia as the truly European Christian civilization, a belief that is otherwise widely shared in political conservative circles, the Kremlin included (cf. Putin's 2013 Valdai Speech as cited in Laruelle 2016). The kind of civilizationism examined in this chapter is predominantly oriented towards Russia as a "state-civilization" and Russia as a set of culture and ideas, quite consistently opposed in a Danilevskian fashion to the West.

A marked tendency in the material explored in this chapter is the maintaining and recycling of commonplaces about Russia, instead of analysing or theorizing. However, given the fuzzy nature of civilization, a concept that is known for having a multitude of meanings and uses, alternative significations are likely to emerge. Above, we have seen that such notions might be civilization in terms of cultivation (cf. Norbert Elias' classical study) or a domain inferior to culture (known as the "German tradition"). Moreover, we have also witnessed uncertainty as to whether civilization is of the past, present or future. All these ambiguities inevitably create tensions in what is otherwise a seemingly uniform, reproductive discourse. Thus, at the turn of a new decade, Russian civilizationism, while apparently hegemonic and approved by top institutions, is potentially destabilized both by tensions within the discourse and by other, more flexible civilizational identifications shared by the broader public.¹⁹

19 Another recent analysis based on surveys made in 2014–2016 also suggests that "more elaborate ideological versions of 'Russia as a state-civilization' did not resonate with respondents" and that "this lack of deeper articulation will reduce the mobilizing appeal and long-term viability of the 'state-civilization' narrative" (Blackburn 2020, 15).

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