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## *Civilizational analysis, political discourse, and reception of Western modernity in post-Soviet Russia<sup>1</sup>*

Yulia Prozorova

### Introduction

Russian history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reveals abrupt and radical changes to the fundamental visions and trajectories of Russian society. The “post-Soviet” era unfolded a distinct perspective on modernity that attempted to combine the Western liberal democracy model with the legacy of Soviet Communism, along with some perpetuating traditional structures.

The Western influence on Russia after 1991 was remarkable. The “reencounter” with Western modernity, the “historical choice” to implement its cultural and political forms in Russia, and intense interactions between Russia and the West after the collapse of the USSR have been crucial driving forces for modernization and transformation processes in contemporary Russia. Russia as the inventor of an alternative modernity project that had been in a long conflict with the West made a critical step toward Western modernity seen as the only possible civilizational pathway. The early 1990s were transformational in Russia’s history when its society demonstrated an ultimate “openness” to the Western models. Russia initially borrowed Western cultural ideas and institutional forms, but they became more limited, regulated, or filtered out later.

This era was marked by new societal opportunities and heated debates about alternative social and political trajectories for post-Soviet society. Discussions of the new constitution and legal foundations for the Russian society indicated a conflict between neoliberal and neoconservative political programs, and between the parliamentary and the presidential republican projects of political architecture, in which intellectuals, law specialists and political agents took part.

The assumption that Western liberal democracy had become the universal model was proclaimed in the late 1980s<sup>2</sup>. However, after almost three decades have passed, this belief has proven unrealistic. Modern societies, including post-Communist ones that acknowledged the adherence to the “Western idea,” demonstrate persistent differences in their cultural and institutional characteristics. Western-inspired projects gave rise to patterns and orientations that differ greatly from the original ideal. Diverse reactions, reflections, and evaluations of the Western-type liberal democracy, which emerge in different discourses, contribute to the articulation of Russia’s post-Soviet version of the modernity project.

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<sup>1</sup> This study was funded by the Russian government, project “Foundations and trends of the Russian civilizational dynamics in culture, politics, economy”, No. AAAA-A17-117030110143-6.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” *The National Interest* Summer (1989): 3–18.

Official political discourse retains a special importance since the communicative practices of the political elites generate interpretations and meanings, which are able to become programmatic for the design and arrangement of the main societal domains. This paper considers civilizational analysis and associated multiple modernities theory as a promising framework for understanding of the post-Soviet Russians experience of modernity in Russia. It also provides a review of how contemporary Russian political discourse receives and interprets the Western modernity project.

### **Theoretical background: civilizational analysis and multiple modernities theory**

After the Communist project failed, it was declared that Russia had “returned to civilization”<sup>3</sup> and had integrated into the European “civilized community.” This was accomplished by having made the “historical choice” to adopt political liberalism, democracy, and the free market, which constitute the core of Western modernity. The following radical transformations have been interpreted by political elites and some academics as the next stage of modernization for the previous Soviet endeavor.

The “Post-Communist transition” and “modernization” experience are seen to be the principal trends and the most influential frameworks in the post-Soviet period. Teleological assumptions and the idea of the universality of the Western project of democratic market-based society regarded as the epitome of modernity and a “blueprint for the future,” constitute the core of “transitology”<sup>4</sup>. Transition is regarded as a cultural and political convergence of post-communist societies with the West. This frame of reference calls for a singular developmental pathway towards modernity that post-Soviet Russia can follow only by implementing the Western ideas and institutional forms.

In that political discourse, the concept of modernization appeared to be a symbol of the long-term reform initiatives undertaken by the Russian government representing Russia’s adherence to the “community of civilized states.” In the discourse of the social sciences, modernization theory has become an umbrella approach that has covered a number of models explaining the peculiarities of the post-Soviet transformation.

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<sup>3</sup> Iver Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe: Identity and International Relations* (Routledge, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 13:1 (2002): 5-27; Johann Paul Arnason, “Designs and Destinies: Making Sense of Post-Communism,” *Thesis Eleven*, 63 (2000): 89-97.

However, the proposed models of Russian modernization (e.g. the “convergence,” “catch-up modernization,” and “recurrent modernization”), as well as the transitology framework disregard the socio-cultural and historical legacies that have shaped the diversity of the modernization experience and its outcomes<sup>5</sup>. The diversity and variety of modernity are undertheorized in those frameworks.

Critics of such a modernization approach proposed alternatives that claimed to be more sensitive to Russia’s cultural and institutionally different frameworks (institutional divergence, sociocultural modernization, world-system theory and the local civilizations theory)<sup>6</sup>. However, these frameworks provide deterministic and reductionist explanations and are unable to grasp the social transformations with their diverse and internally controversial cultural characteristics. They also neglect historical contingency, cultural autonomy and the creative potential of social imaginaries and cultural interpretations.

The renaissance of the civilizational perspective<sup>7</sup> in sociology was inspired by a critical reaction to the prevalence of the teleological and universalistic Eurocentric conception of modernization. Convergence and transition models revealed their epistemological weakness given the indisputable diversity and heterogeneity of contemporary societies. Civilizations are viewed as long-term historical complexes constituted by a combination of cultural orientations and institutional patterns. Although civilizational analysis comprises different theoretical approaches, the common focus is on the cultural dimension – the variability of cultural visions and interpretations of the world, and on their potential in shaping institutional formations. These complexes entail a cultural and institutional diversity of “transitional” modernizations along with well-developed modern societies that call into question the idea of “the end of history” when all ideological and societal differences disappear.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid; Paul Blokker, "Post-Communist Modernization, Transition Studies, and Diversity in Europe," *European Journal of Social Theory* 8, no. 4 (2005): 503-25.

<sup>6</sup> Ruslan G. Braslavskiy, “Sotsiologicheskie modeli sovremennogo rossiyskogo obschestva: ot globalnoy modernizatsii k globalnoy modernosti”, in *Peterburgskaya sotziologiya segodnya: Sbornik nauchnih trudov Sotziologicheskogo instituta RAN* (St.Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriya, 2010), 7-20.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Nelson, Shmuel Eisenstadt, Johann Arnason, and Toby Huff articulated the most important ideas and frameworks for understanding of civilizational phenomena, although the research field remains heterogeneous.

The assumption of “historical contingency” set against the cultural domain seen as an autonomous symbolic reality, open to various competitive interpretations and imaginaries in such a way that emergent meanings and orientations have the capacity to transcend the existing social frameworks. The ideas of contingency, discontinuity, and creativity of action and social imagination, along with openness and indeterminacy of societal development oppose the evolutionistic and structuralist approaches as well as the historicity, determinism and teleologism of the widely accepted modernization theory<sup>8</sup>. The cultural and the imaginary constitute an irrevocable dimension of the institutions<sup>9</sup>. It is this potentially creative aspect of the institutions that facilitates the radical transformations in the history of societies.

One of the principle themes of civilizational analysis is the dynamic of “intercivilizational encounters.” B. Nelson, who coined the term, focused on the relations between different “structures of consciousness” comprising cultural world-views, ideas, logics and key images (of experiences, self, etc.) that direct human thinking, perception, agency and experience<sup>10</sup>. The concept of intercivilizational encounters can be understood more broadly as a relationship between different civilizational complexes or “paradigmatic cultural patterns” and their respective elements<sup>11</sup>. The expansion and the adoption of the Western modernity project by the recipient societies with different historical and civilizational backgrounds, produce a crucial modern form of intercivilizational encounters.

Such encounters “often result in decisive cultural borrowings, adaptations of alien ideas and creative syntheses emerging from challenges to inherited ways of thinking [...] in new cultural creations which decisively modify the future civilizational landscape for one or more of the parties involved”<sup>12</sup>.

Civilizational analysis assumes the multiplicity of civilizational complexes and traditions that account for the diversity of responses to Western innovations. Multiple modernities theory, introduced by Shmuel Eisenstadt, is a crucial contribution to the theoretical debate on the dynamics of contemporary societies, especially the post-Communist ones.

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<sup>8</sup> See Johann P. Arnason, “Civilizational Analysis, Social Theory and Comparative History,” in *Handbook of Contemporary European Social Theory*, ed. by Gerard Delanty (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 230-241; Wolfgang Knöbl, “Contingency and modernity in the thought of J.P. Arnason,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 14, no. 1 (2011): 9-22.

<sup>9</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. K Blamey (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA1987 [1975]).

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Nelson, *On the Roads to Modernity: Conscience, Science, and Civilizations*, ed. Toby Huff (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.83-84.

<sup>12</sup> Donald A. Nielsen, “Rationalization, Transformations of Consciousness and Intercivilizational Encounters. Reflections on Benjamin Nelson’s Sociology of Civilizations,” in *Rethinking Civilizational Analysis*, ed. Said Amir Arjomand and Edward A. Tiryakian (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 120.

It proclaims that “modernity and Westernization are not identical” and that “Western patterns of modernity are not the only “authentic” modernities”<sup>13</sup>. The modernity project (liberalism, democracy, capitalism, nation-state) that had originated in the West constitutes a crucial (albeit ambivalent) “basic reference point” for other societies across the globe; however, its diffusion entailed “the interaction of new orientations with older legacies” that gave rise to the diverse interpretations of its basic components.

Intercivilizational encounters presume a selective acquisition and possible mutation of originally borrowed patterns incorporated into a civilizational context with its local cultural traditions and institutional premises.

[...] in societies belonging to the other major Eurasian civilizational complexes, the modernizing transformations induced or at least accelerated by Western influences were at the same time conditioned by socio-cultural backgrounds that left enduring marks on the resultant patterns of modernity<sup>14</sup>.

As Arnason suggests, the encounter between the West and the rest should not be regarded as “the Westernization of the world,” or a triumph of civilization in the singular, but they should be understood as “the global projection of a problematic that remains open to diverse interpretations in the West and alternative ones in the non-Western arena”<sup>15</sup>.

The multiplicity of forms of modernity arises from the ambiguity of interpretations and responses to the constituent *problematisques* of modernity (self-determination, human autonomy and emancipation, rationality, reflexivity, progress, etc.)<sup>16</sup> are open to rival interpretations, since modernity itself is poly-interpretative. The variety of competing versions of political, social and economic orders may derive from the different reactions to Western modernity, and its internal tensions between different conceptions of civilizational identity and imaginaries (e.g. Slavophile, Westernizers, Eurasian), etc.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus* 129(1) (2000): 1-29; Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, “Some Observations on Multiple Modernities,” in *Reflections on multiple modernities : European, Chinese, and other interpretations*, ed. by Dominic Sachsenmaier, Shmuel Eisenstadt, and Jens Riedel (Brill, 2001), 27-41.

<sup>14</sup> Johann P. Arnason, “Civilizational Analysis as a Paradigm in the Making,” in *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems* (Paris: Eolss Publishers, France, 2007). <http://www.eolss.net/Sample-Chapters/C04/E6-97-01-00.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Johann P. Arnason, “Understanding Intercivilizational Encounters,” *Thesis Eleven*, 86(1) (2006): 51.

<sup>16</sup> Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, “Modernity and the Construction of Collective Identities,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 39(1) (1998): 138-158; Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, “The Paradox of Democratic Regimes: Fragility and Transformability,” *Sociological Theory* 16(3) (1998): 211-238; Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus* 129(1) (2000): 1-29.

<sup>17</sup> For the historical examples, which demonstrate the plurality of responses to the Western project, see: Sudipta Kaviraj, “Modernity and Politics in India,” *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 137-62; Blokker, Post-Communist Modernization; Paul Blokker, “Confrontations with Modernity: Openness and Closure in the Other Europe,” *Eurozine Online*, 2010 <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2010-06-15-blokker->

The intercivilizational encounter framework allows for studying the post-Soviet version of modernity as a reinterpretation of the original Western institutional models and cultural ideas. In his study of diverse experiences of modernity in several post-communist Eastern European countries, Blokker<sup>18</sup> acknowledges the importance of the communist legacy, which in various ways shapes transformations in these societies. However, he disregards the significance of the pre-Communist traditional structures, histories of long-term intercultural contacts, and the imperial background that have left their marks on the post-Communist experience. In the case of post-Soviet Russia, both the pre-revolutionary legacy and the Soviet Communist experience must be taken into account. Some of the features of the Russian civilizational complex define the context in which the post-Soviet reception of the Western modernity takes place. There are some crucial differences between Russian and Western civilizational complexes, among them religious, legal, and how power is used.

Donald Nielsen identified a set of differences between Russia and Western Europe which shaped the specificity of Russian civilizational structures. They include: the Byzantine path of inheritance and reception of classical and early Christian traditions; the interconnection and quasi-separation of church and state; religious sects and movements that “failed to sustain ‘liberal’ political ideas, rationalized and universalistic orientations”; and the patriarchal and communal orientations that differ from the notion of “associations” that predominate in the Western social structures and institutions<sup>19</sup>.

Medieval Russia was mostly unfamiliar with the antique classical legacy (the works of Plato, Aristotle, late Greek philosophy, Hellenic science, Roman law), and aware only to a limited extent of early Christian theology, all of which had an immense effect on the cultural orientation of Western Europe and carried marked civilizational consequences<sup>20</sup>.

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en.html; Jeremy, CA Smith, “The Many Americas. Civilization and Modernity in the Atlantic World,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 13(1) (2010): 117–133; Peter Wagner, “From interpretation to civilization – and back: Analyzing the trajectories of non-European modernities,” *European Journal of Social Theory*, 14(1) (2011): 89–106; Mota, Aurea, Delanty Gerard. “Eisenstadt, Brazil and the Multiple Modernities Framework: Revisions and Reconsiderations,” *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 15 (1) (2015): 39-57.

<sup>18</sup> Blokker, Post-Communist Modernization.

<sup>19</sup> Donald A. Nielsen, “Sects, Churches and Economic Transformations in Russia and Western Europe,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 2(4) (1989): 493-522.

<sup>20</sup> Nelson, *On the Roads*; Toby E. Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China, and the West*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2003); Toby E. Huff, “Europe as a Civilization: The Revolution of the Middle Ages & The Rise of the Universities,” *Comparative Civilizations Review* 69 (2013): 65-86.

The profound formative influence of Byzantium on the Russian civilizational complex is widely accepted. The diffusion of Byzantine civilization (its law, religion, political and ideological forms, literature, and art) was welcomed by the Russians of the Middle Ages, however, their adoption was remarkably selective. Various elements of the Byzantine complex were accepted, rejected and transformed<sup>21</sup>. Although Russian legal proceedings and codes of the 10<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries contain some norms of the Roman Law adopted through the translation of the Byzantium legal texts<sup>22</sup>, Russian secular law showed few signs of direct Byzantine influence<sup>23</sup>.

The systematic reception and incorporation of *Roman law* into the Russian legal code and practices happened only in 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The legal modernization and codification of the late imperial period in Russia tended to admit the European ideas of human rights and freedom, but at the same time the vision of the traditional monarchical and autocratic power structure remained mostly intact. “Legal dualism,” that is, the controversial coexistence of the rational law imposed by the state versus the traditional common law based on popular practices of justice and paternalism, is a characteristic feature of the Russian legal tradition<sup>24</sup>. The legal system has little autonomy while the principle of “informal justice [that] is above any formal law,” is still conventionally accepted<sup>25</sup>.

The impact of Byzantium and the Mongols on the evolution of distinct cultural and political patterns appear to be the most significant. According to Obolensky, Byzantine civilization was more efficiently assimilated in the Eastern European countries characterized by an evolving or already established centralized form of government. Another important observation is that the relationship between the development of monarchical institutions and the acceptance of Byzantine culture was often reciprocal – “not only did political centralization pave the way for Byzantinization; the reverse was equally true”<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Dimitri Obolensky, “The Relations Between Byzantium and Russia (11th–15th Century),” in *XIIIth International Congress of Historical Sciences* (Moscow, 1970), 1–13.

<sup>22</sup> E.V. Salogubova, “Elementy rimskogo prava v rossiyskom sudoproizvodstve X-XVII vekah,” *IVS ANTIQVVM. Drevnee parvo*, 1 (4) (1999): 173-179.

<sup>23</sup> Obolensky, *The Relations Between Byzantium and Russia*.

<sup>24</sup> Andrei N. Medushevsky, *Rossiyskaya pravovaya tradicia – opora ili pregrada?* (Moskva: Fond “Liberalnaya missia”, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Tatiana B. Koval, “Elita i npravstvennost (religiovedcheskie zapiski),” *Mir Rossii* 3-4 (1995): 131-157.

<sup>26</sup> Obolensky, “The Relations Between Byzantium and Russia,” p.11.



The Muscovite state formation and its power structure is undeniably the major domain where Byzantium and Mongol influences coalesce and where the Oriental tradition of political culture culminated. It is only possible to name briefly some of those peculiarities that shape the contour of the Russia state-society pattern: fusion of secular and sacral power; patrimonialism; centralization and concentration of power and resources of control; a tight connection between state formation and territorial control and expansion; and cultural distance between the rulers and the masses; and establishment of a “state-conditioned society”, an institutional framework which presupposes the systematic subordination of society to the imperatives of state formation, etc. (Arnason 1993).

Peter the Great fundamentally reformed the state in accordance with the Western model of the “well-ordered-society.” His epoch is marked by an articulated imperial project and a practice of transformation-from-above with deliberate assimilation of Western forms. The radical Westernization and modernization of Peter the Great contributed to the rationalization process, and to secularization, as well as scientific and technological development. Nevertheless, there exists a persistent internal contradiction underlying the incentives to impose the rule of law, with its associated codification, modernization and liberalization of the legal sphere. The centralized autocratic state system requires submission of the person to the state that maintains almost unlimited power. State domination continues to be the legitimate embodiment of all power. In this context, the emergence of a public sphere, legally autonomous entities and the development of human rights, along with individual and collective autonomy, have always been complicated by the traditionally strong patrimonial state that intruded, absorbed and controlled the society.

European modernity with its “the disembodiment of power” (in Claude Lefort’s terminology) has never happened in Russia. The ruler has always been a physical and symbolic incarnation of the state, society, and law. Historically, Russia has evolved as a patrimonial-bureaucratic state with a sacralized authority and power, organized around a single ruler/leader. One of the most important adoptions came from the late Byzantine era conception of Caesaro-papism, that is, a subordination of Church to the secular ruler as a cornerstone of Russian absolutism.

The Orthodox Christian worldview, which is characterized by a general otherworldly orientation found their reflection in the relevant “structures of consciousness,” and in visions of secular social orders. These frameworks were applied to government, to images of power, to the roles of authority and elites, and to the definition of economic ethics and rationality<sup>27</sup>. In comparison to Protestantism in Western Europe, Russia’s ascetically oriented sects of the 17<sup>th</sup> century did not become a driving force in the formation of “modern” structures, and exerted a very limited influence on the main aspects of life. The traditional structures continued to dominate, including the mystic-contemplative nature of Orthodox Christianity<sup>28</sup>.

Russian particularism, the notion of “*sobornost*” (conciliarity), as well as the distinct social, cultural and political orientations of a more communal and patrimonial type, contributed less to social differentiation and rationalization in Russia, and in fact opposed “universalism” and social, cultural and political institutions of a more “associational” character “rooted in a series of historical transformations towards a more rationalized, differentiated, universalistic and individuated system” of the West<sup>29</sup>.

In Russia, a service state system evolved that corresponds to the “*liturgical state*”<sup>30</sup> described by Max Weber. This is a state whose needs are met by a contrived system of duties and the individual’s position in the social structure. The Russian state is also characterized by a unification of authority and property, sacralization of power, and the role of authority in distribution of wealth and in the implementation of radical reformation “from above.” According to Medushevsky, this system reached its apogee during the Stalinist era<sup>31</sup>.

The Soviet experience in the creation of communist society and its modernization program demonstrates the continuity of certain traditional pre-revolutionary Russian models. The pre-revolutionary complex of the patrimonial rulership, caesaro-papist state and church continued in the Soviet period in “the new Communist ideological form of articulation of “religion,” state, and society.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Koval, *Elita i npravstvennost*; Tatiana B. Koval, “Trudovaya etika v pravoslavii,” *Obschestvennie nauki i sovremennost* 6 (1994): 55-70; Tatiana B. Koval, “Lichnost i sobstvennost. Christianstvo i drugie religii mira,” *Mir Rossii* 2 (2003): 3-45; Andreas Buss, “The Economic Ethics of Russian-Orthodox Christianity: Part I,” *International Sociology* 4 (3) (1989): 235-258, and Part II: “Russian Old Believers and Sects,” *International Sociology* 4(4) (1989): 447-472.

<sup>28</sup> Buss, “The Economic Ethics,” Part I and Part II; Nielen, “Sects, Churches and Economic Transformations.”

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, pp.499-501.

<sup>30</sup> Andrei N. Medushevsky, *Proekty agrarnykh reform v Rossii, XVIII - nachalo XXI veka* (Moskva: Nauka, 2005); Andrei Medushevsky, *Russian Constitutionalism: Historical and Contemporary Development* (Routledge, 2006), p. 68.

<sup>31</sup> Andrei N. Medushevsky, *Rossiyskaya pravovaya tradicia – opora ili pregrada?* (Moskva: Fond “Liberalnaya missia”, 2014), p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> Nielsen, “Sects, Churches and Economic Transformations,” p.516.

The core of the Soviet model was a fusion of an imperial and revolutionary traditions<sup>33</sup>. The Soviet program of modernity was characterized by integration of ideological, political, and economic power represented by the party-state; “interconnected principles of organization”: party-state, command economy, and ideological orthodoxy; the conception of “socialism in one country”; the fantasy of a shortcut to affluence through total social mobilization; an ideology analogous to a secular religion. At the same time, the Soviet model attempted to embrace rationality, the ideas of progress, and mastery of nature<sup>34</sup>. It adopted a superficial universality and introduced a selective and repressive “socialist law.” This complex legacy, together with diverse cultural interpretations, evoke a reshaping of the assimilated Western models and suggest the character of the resultant modernity patterns in post-Soviet Russia.

### **Post-Soviet “re-encounter” with the West: political discourse on the Western project of liberal democracy**

As mentioned before, the multiplicity of modernities resulted from the diversity of civilizational backgrounds; it is inspired by the societal reflexivity represented by various visions of societal development and evaluations of Western innovations that grow in different discourses and comprise the interpretative-discursive dimension of “intercivilizational encounters.” Discourses may reflect indigenous structures of consciousness, with ideas and images of the historical experience and collective identity that resonate with preconditions of the political and economic models of the Western project.

Although diverse responses emerged in different discourses outside of the political realm and agents of modernization come from various fields, the ideas and visions that were articulated by the political officials have had a profound impact on the policy-making process and the shape of post-Soviet Russia’s institutional landscape; indeed, more so than non-political elites. Compared to the various political and public actors who have limited access to the main communication arenas, state officials have acquired more communication resources to express and propagate their ideas, to control and dominate the discourse. In present-day Russia, the political arena tends to be more isolated, homogeneous and state-regulated. Critical reflections on Western democracy and liberalism are expressed through different genres of political communication. These include presidential addresses, interviews, political articles, official statements and documents, and the like.

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<sup>33</sup> Johann P. Arnason, *The Future that Failed: Origins and Destinies of the Soviet Model* (Routledge, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> Johann P. Arnason, “The Soviet Model as a Mode of Globalization,” *Thesis Eleven* 41 (1995): 36–53; Johann P. Arnason, “Communism and modernity,” *Daedalus* 1 (2000): 61–90.

An important aspect of the debates on the direction of post-Soviet modernization and the question of the relevance of the Western project, is the broad civilizational discourse and the competing frameworks of the Russian civilizational identity, for which the Western conception is a crucial reference point. Such discourse was revitalized during *perestroika*, when a critical revision of the Soviet project of modernity and reconsideration of Western capitalism took place.

In the 1980s, the idea of a “common European home” and the concept of Russia’s civilizational identity as part of Western civilization, were articulated along with the novel political paradigm of “new thinking.”<sup>35</sup> By the late 1980s, the possibility of implementing the Western capitalist model in Russia was introduced. On the eve of the USSR’s collapse and throughout the early post-Soviet years, the idea of the universality of the institutional forms and cultural orientations of Western modernity dominated. As it was proclaimed, and having acknowledged the necessity of modernization according to Western standards, Russia had “returned to civilization.” Even after the dissolution of the USSR, this concept and the scenario of Russia’s integration into the European “civilized community” retained its relevance.

Boris Yeltsin’s Addresses to the Federal Assembly of 1994-1999 reflect Russia’s aspiration to assimilate the Western-European civilizational variant and the necessity of introducing the “civilized” institutions and practices such as a market economy, rule of law, civil society, and private property. However, by the mid-1990s, this vision of Western modernity was supplemented with Russian particularism. In his Address of 1996, he noted that Russia is following the common developmental path of civilization, but in its own distinct way. Yeltsin argued that Russia is a unique country with its own interests and its own logic of development<sup>36</sup>.

Yeltsin’s presidency ended with the Address called, “Russia at the Turn of the Epoch”<sup>37</sup>. He concluded that the choice of the pathway toward a market economy made in 1991 “was and still is right” and “we do not have another path.” Vladimir Putin’s article, “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium” continues this narrative: Russia “has entered the highway by which the whole of humanity is travelling”<sup>38</sup>. It has no alternative and characterizes the Soviet period as a wrong “dead-end route.”

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<sup>35</sup> Mikhail S. Gorbachev, *Perestroika i novoe myshlenie dlya nashey strany i dlya vsego mira* (Moskva: Politizdat, 1988).

<sup>36</sup> *Poslanie prezidenta Federalnomu sobraniyu* 1996.

[http://www.intelros.ru/2007/02/05/poslanie\\_prezidenta\\_rossii\\_borisa\\_elcina\\_federalnomu\\_sobraniju\\_rf\\_rossija\\_za\\_kotoruju\\_my\\_v\\_otvete\\_1996\\_god.html](http://www.intelros.ru/2007/02/05/poslanie_prezidenta_rossii_borisa_elcina_federalnomu_sobraniju_rf_rossija_za_kotoruju_my_v_otvete_1996_god.html)

<sup>37</sup> *Poslanie prezidenta Federalnomu sobraniyu* 1999.

[http://www.intelros.ru/2007/02/05/poslanie\\_prezidenta\\_rossii\\_borisa\\_elcina\\_federalnomu\\_sobraniju\\_rf\\_rossija\\_na\\_rubezhe\\_jepokh\\_1999\\_god.html](http://www.intelros.ru/2007/02/05/poslanie_prezidenta_rossii_borisa_elcina_federalnomu_sobraniju_rf_rossija_na_rubezhe_jepokh_1999_god.html)

<sup>38</sup> Vladimir V. Putin, “Rossiya na rubezhe tysyacheletiy,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta* 20.12.1999.

[http://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4\\_millennium.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4_millennium.html)

That political discourse highlighted Russia's strong cultural connection with Europe. Putin noted that Russia is a part of Western European culture, and Russians are Europeans. This position supports Russian borrowing of the "universal economic mechanisms and democracy" from the West.

Since the mid-2000's, "modernization" has become one of the key topics of the government's economic and political programs integrated into the universalist civilizational discourse. This modernization is based on democratic values that themselves will allow the country to proceed to the next stage of civilization<sup>39</sup>.

Since the mid-1990s, radical Westernism has competed against exceptionalism and nationalist trends in the discourse identifying Russia as a distinct civilization. Although Yeltsin claimed Russia to be "an integral part of the civilized world," he also stressed that Russia "cleaves to the traditional values"<sup>40</sup>. The idea of a Russian civilizational uniqueness continued to grow in the late 2000's, along with the conception of a multi-polar global political architecture.

"The multiple forms of the contemporary world reflect its more fundamental characteristic—cultural and civilizational diversity."<sup>41</sup> It was argued that global competition acquired a civilizational dimension. Russia's mission lies in its "contribution to the cultural and civilizational diversity of the contemporary world and to the development of an intercivilizational partnership and dialogue"<sup>42</sup>. The ultimate point of this argument is that Russia is a unique "state-civilization"<sup>43</sup>.

This conception of Russia's distinct civilizational status among other existing historical civilizational complexes justifies its "special path" to modernity. This civilizational framework incorporates ideas that subsequently entailed original interpretations of democracy and the market economy.

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<sup>39</sup> Dmitry A. Medvedev, "Go, Russia!" President of Russia, 2009.

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5413>

<sup>40</sup> *Poslanie prezidenta Federalnomu sobraniyu* 1999.

<http://www.intelros.ru/2007/02/05/poslanie-prezidenta-rosii-borisa-elcina-federalnomu-sobraniju-rossija-na-rubezhe-jepokh-1999-god.html>

<sup>41</sup> Sergey Lavrov, "Russia and the World in the 21st Century," *Russia in Global Affairs* 3 (2008).

<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Russia-in-the-21st-Century-World-of-Power-15809>

<sup>42</sup> *Koncepciya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federacii* 2008. President of Russia.

<http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/785>

<sup>43</sup> *Poslanie prezidenta Federalnomu sobraniyu* 2012.

<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/17118>

Putin began his presidency with the claim that Russia needed to search for its own way of renewal, not to copy the experience of others or transfer “abstract models and schemes to the Russian soil.” It should also combine “the universal principles of market economy and democracy with Russia’s reality.”<sup>44</sup>

There is not and could not be a political choice for Russia other than democracy. At the same time, I would like to say and even stress: we share the universal democratic principles that are accepted across the world. However, the Russian democracy is the rule of the Russian people in particular, with its own traditions of self-government, and not at all an implementation of the standards that were imposed upon us from the outside<sup>45</sup>.

“Adaptation” marked the beginning of a decisive turn towards a revisionism and critique of the Western liberal democracy. The revisionist trend in political discourse summed up several fundamental “values” rooted in Russian traditions: the concept of the “Russian idea” (*Rossiyskaya ideya*)<sup>46</sup>. It proclaimed that Russian democracy should rest upon traditional orientations.

“Traditional consolidating values” highlighted in the late 1990s have turned out to be key for the political discourse and institutional development of the following years<sup>47</sup>. It took the form of accenting

- Patriotism,
- “Greatness of authority” (*derzhavnost*),
- Social solidarity with an “inclination to collective forms of life that dominate over individualism,” along with
- “Statism” (*gosudarstvennichestvo*), a deep-rooted paternalistic disposition.

The idea of a “strong state” is crucial for the post-Soviet political discourse. The traditionally important role of the state and state institutions was proclaimed as Russia’s major difference from the developed Western countries, such as Great Britain and the US.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Putin, “Rossiya na rubezhe tysiacheletiy”.

<sup>45</sup> *Poslanie prezidenta Federalnomu sobraniyu* 2013.

<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/19825>

<sup>46</sup> Putin, “Rossiya na rubezhe tysiacheletiy”.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

The state, its institutions and structures have always played an exceptionally important role in the life of the country and its people. A strong state is not an anomaly for a Russian man, not something to be fought, but, on the opposite, a source and a guarantee of order, an origin and the major driving force for any changes. Society desires a reinstatement of the regulatory and leading power of the State to the extent, which would be required, considering the traditions and the current condition of our country<sup>49</sup>.

The “strong state” is seen as a prerequisite for Russia’s democracy since “many Russian democratic institutions are created from above.” “Civil society requires a strong state as an instrument of development and maintenance of order, for defense and strengthening of democratic institutes.”<sup>50</sup>

Despite public activism, wide social support and contribution to democratic changes in late-1980s and early 1990s, the introduction of democratic institutions and practices or reformation of the state on democratic grounds after the collapse of the Soviet Union was to a greater degree a state-supervised policy. The articulated vision of the state and its central role in the democratic reformation of post-Soviet Russia suggests the continuity of the transformation initiated from above, much as it was in pre-revolutionary imperial Russia and the Soviet “revolution from above” and Gorbachev’s reformist project.

These ideas articulated and elaborated in political discourse laid the foundation for alternative interpretations of the original Western models. Disagreements with Western democracy, reconsideration of the relevance of the Western-type democracy to Russian society, and a critique of the West for its hegemony and monopolization of the democratic model (dissemination and intrusion of a specific form of democracy), became more pronounced after the mid-2000s.

The conception of a “sovereign democracy”<sup>51</sup> was introduced that suggested an independent character for Russian democracy and that negated the relevance of other democratic models. The new ideological framework became the climax of the political discourse on the unique and national character of Russian democracy. The concept of “sovereign democracy” was invented to propagate the Russian version of a “political language” or “philosophy” that competes with other “languages” and “discourses” (predominantly the Western ones) and communicates Russian-born ideas and interpretations.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> *Poslanie prezidenta Federalnomu sobraniyu 2008*.  
<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/19825>

<sup>51</sup> Vladislav Surkov, “Russian Political Culture: The View from Utopia,” *Russian Politics & Law* 46(5) (2008): 10-26; Vladislav Surkov, “Nationalization of the Future: Paragraphs pro Sovereign Democracy,” *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 47(4) (Spring) (2009): 8–21.

This conception emanates from the notion that the foundation of the “sovereign democracy” lies in the “cultural matrix” defining political practices: “striving toward political wholeness through the centralization of power functions,” “idealization of the goals of political struggle,” and “personification of political institutions”<sup>52</sup>. In the present context, Russia’s modern political arrangement focuses on patrimonialism embedded in a strong centralized state with personified authority. Power and authority, embodied by President Putin, is again recognized as the source, the producer, and the guarantee of the modern reforms.

The personification of political institutions is obvious. People say that in our country personality displaces institutions. It seems to me that in our political culture the individual personality is an institution—by no means the sole institution but a very important one. The holistic outlook is emotional. It demands the literal embodiment of images. Doctrines and programs do, of course, matter. But they find expression, above all, through the image of a charismatic personality, and only then with the aid of words and syllogisms<sup>53</sup>.

A special place in the discourse is devoted to the formula “if there is Putin – there is Russia, if there is no Putin – there is no Russia.”<sup>54</sup> In this statement, the President is recognized as a condition for the Russia’s very existence in the current historical epoch, and also as an embodiment of power and the nation. This contradicts the principle of the “disembodiment” of power, law, and knowledge as a fundamental orientation of Western democracy<sup>55</sup>.

The fundamental principles of the Putin state — the primacy of the state, the consolidation, centralization and monopolization of power through the personification of authority in the figure of the President as the embodiment of Russia, and as a condition for the existence of the state — imply a fusion of the spheres of politics, law, economy and culture. All this stands in opposition to the autonomy and independent functions found in democratic societies.

Personified centralized authority concentrates resources and monopolizes the functions governing these realms. It also awards itself the right to know and understand the needs and paths of development of each sector, oftentimes ignoring public opinion, while co-opting institutions of civil discussion and participation.

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<sup>52</sup> Surkov, *Russian Political Culture*, p.12.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p.14

<sup>54</sup> As formulated by V.Volodin, the deputy head of the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation, at the Valdai International Discussion Club (October 22 2014, Sochi, Russia).

<sup>55</sup> Claude Lefort, *Politicheskie zapiski* (Moskva: Rosspen, 2000), pp. 20-21.



Apart from this, the centralized structure of political life is in contention with the pluralist dispositions of Western modernity, its ideals of openness and accessibility of the political arena, distributed decentralized power and blurring of borders between the center and the periphery<sup>56</sup>.

Political officials still pay lip service to the Western democratic ideals of a civil and open society, the primacy of law, respect and support for human rights, although they support the concept of "the special path" and the "Russian world." Conservative and traditionalist values emphasized in Putin's last presidential term, along with anti-Western rhetoric and the critique of Western liberalism, stress the distinction between "we" and "the Western Other." Conservatism, traditionalism, and the increased intolerance of "multiple forms of life" reveal a tension between traditional and modern orientations. Interactions with the West assume a more revisionist shape.

Nationalistic and patriotic discourses in Russia respond to the lack of social solidarity and a search for a national idea that integrates and unites numerous regions with diverse cultural, religious, and historical backgrounds and different ways of interacting with the central authority. Apology for the Soviet period and its imperial imaginary and continuing nostalgia for that very period remain key themes, along with patriotism and Russian historical and cultural greatness.

According to Blokker<sup>57</sup>, "the dual return of nationalism and religion" in some European post-Communist societies where it had gained wide social support is a "form of critique and response to the predominant narratives of liberalism and Europeanism, bemoaning the lack of local autonomy, the fragmentation of societies, and the undermining of traditions and social cohesion." Two types of responses compensate for the state of uncertainty and lack of identity accompanying the post-Communist transformations: reliance on the universality of Europeanness and liberal democracy, or invocation of local traditions and identities. In reality "this dual understanding of modernity is strongly intertwined" as "a duality of openness and closure"<sup>58</sup>. The case of Russian post-Communist experience of modernity clearly approves of this ambivalent and contradictory orientation.

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<sup>56</sup> Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129(1) (2000): 1-29.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Blokker, "Confrontations with Modernity: Openness and Closure in the Other Europe," *Eurozine Online*, 2010 <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2010-06-15-blokker-en.html>

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

The modernization that took place in Russia in the post-Soviet period cannot be considered in the normative perspective of a replication of the Western model of liberal democracy. The experience of other post-Soviet and post-Communist countries demonstrates a variety of responses to the Western modernity project. The post-Soviet transformations should be regarded as a version of modernity originating and unfolding in response to the post-Communist “re-encounter” with the Western democratic project. It entailed complex interactions between traditional and modernizing forces, new understanding and creative interpretation of modernity inspired and derived from certain aspects of enduring civilizational forms, traditional structures, and historical legacies.

The Western project of modernity was a factor in Russia’s turn toward liberal democracy and market economy, along with its themes of individualization, autonomy, emancipation, and pluralism. In 1994, Yeltsin defined Russia as a “democratic, federal, constitutional, social and secular state.”<sup>59</sup> Political discourse of the early 1990s was characterized by a positive perception of Western ideas and models as constituents of a reliable universal project of a modernization that might be able to open and emancipate Russia from a totalitarian past. This initiative was supported by a civilizational discourse stressing a “return to civilization”. However, since the end of 1990s, the Western program has been criticized. It was challenged by the concept of Russia’s “special path,” the “Russian idea” (*Rossiyskaya idea*), “Russian world” (*Russkiy mir*), Russian “state-civilization”, and a messianic framework.

The political discourse on Western modernity strongly corresponds with the discourse on Russia’s civilizational identity (European, “unique civilization,” Eurasian, “state-civilization.”) It revives traditional orientations and representations (“collective forms of life”, statism, paternalistic attitudes, the “strong state,” transformation from above, and imperial imagery.) They provide contextual interpretations of some basic components of the Western project (e.g., the conception of “sovereign democracy”) that support and legitimize a reshaping of the Western models. At the same time, the exceptionalist political conceptions are dissonant with the universalistic orientation of Western modernity.

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<sup>59</sup> *Poslanie prezidenta Federalnomu sobraniyu 1994.*

[http://www.intelros.ru/strategy/gos\\_rf/psl\\_prezident\\_rf\\_old/58-poslanija\\_prezidenta\\_rossii\\_borisa\\_elcina\\_federalnomu\\_sobraniju\\_rf\\_1994\\_god.html](http://www.intelros.ru/strategy/gos_rf/psl_prezident_rf_old/58-poslanija_prezidenta_rossii_borisa_elcina_federalnomu_sobraniju_rf_1994_god.html)

The imperial legacy and the experience of Soviet modernity have intervened to confront the Western program with the local Russian traditions of political culture and political participation. The repercussion of imperial imaginary is noticeable in the cultural-political frameworks of Eurasianism and *Russkiy mir* (Russian world), apology and nostalgic images of the USSR as a superpower, and in the political messianism designed to oppose the Western hegemony.

Official discourse presents the West in terms of messianism, universalism, absolutism and imperialism and defines Russian/ Eurasian/ Orthodox civilization in opposition to these aggressive tendencies<sup>60</sup>. The opposition of the “Russian world” to the West and the idea of an external threat to Russian sovereignty, traditional values and uniqueness, are apparent in the new ideological project and discourse that emerged in recent years. However, on the historical “fork in the road,” signified by “Russia has chosen democracy”<sup>61</sup> and self-isolationism is “the way we will never follow”<sup>62</sup>. Democratic values are understood to be universal, although the universality of the Western framework for the construction of a democratic society and its relevance for contemporary Russia are now contested.

Retraditionalization and restoration of the symbolic and ideological repertoire from the recent non-democratic past are on the march with the introduction of a series of legal, political, and social reforms that strengthened state capacity, promoted centralization, and consolidation of power and constrained the public sphere and autonomy. The modern Russian political system model has evolved into a super-presidential republic, which is characterized by the lack of any considerable separation of powers, as the president is vested with near-absolute executive and legislative powers. Such a system resembles the preceding historical forms of absolutism and constitutional monarchy and restores historical continuity of the legal tradition<sup>63</sup>. This regime can be defined as “authoritarian democracy”. The definition expresses “an opinion made up of a unique combination of democracy and authoritarianism, whose contradictory relations are dialectically reproduced at a new convolution, each time creating a similar synthesis”, and “there can emerge and exist various forms of restricted democracy and authoritarianism.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Kerstin, Rebecca Bouveng, *The Role of Messianism in Contemporary Russian Identity and Statecraft*. Durham theses, (Durham University, 2010.) E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/438/>

<sup>61</sup> *Poslanie prezidenta Federalnomu sobraniyu 1994*.  
[http://www.intelros.ru/strategy/gos\\_rf/psl\\_prezident\\_rf\\_old/58-poslanija\\_prezidenta\\_rossii\\_borisa\\_elcina\\_federalnomu\\_sobraniju\\_rf\\_1994\\_god.html](http://www.intelros.ru/strategy/gos_rf/psl_prezident_rf_old/58-poslanija_prezidenta_rossii_borisa_elcina_federalnomu_sobraniju_rf_1994_god.html)

<sup>62</sup> *Poslanie prezidenta Federalnomu sobraniyu 2014*.  
<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/47173>

<sup>63</sup> Medushevsky, *Rossiyskaya pravovaya tradicia*, p.112; Medushevsky, *Russian Constitutionalism*, pp. 226-229.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, p. 230.

The idea of a strong state is characteristic of some modern democratic regimes, although “high-capacity states” always run the risk of de-democratization<sup>65</sup>. The civilizational dimension of this problem is fundamental, although “fragility and instability are inherent in the very constitution of modern constitutional-democratic regimes”<sup>66</sup>.

The revival of the meanings and ideas of the traditional political culture is a twofold issue. It is instrumental in the sense that it provides cultural infrastructure that is able to legitimize the restoration of the patrimonial-authoritarian configuration behind a democratic façade. However, in Russia, it is also a reflection and an effect of a broader cultural context of meanings and imaginaries integrated into the long-term civilizational pattern of culture and power.

Although one may conclude that Russia cannot escape her non-democratic historical path, the post-Communist era is notable for a renewed and expanded horizon of meanings enriched by the democratic imaginary. Along with creative interpretations of traditions, this intensifies the tension and competition between different perspectives and social imaginaries that may inform and produce new societal forms and projects.

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<sup>65</sup> Charles Tilly, *Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>66</sup> Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, “The Paradox of Democratic Regimes: Fragility and Transformability,” *Sociological Theory* 16(3) (1998): 211.