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Abstract

The foreign policy of Russia in the near abroad is the continuation of its domestic policy, which includes the consolidation of the population around a leader by means of creating an image of an enemy, especially at times when the economic situation in the country is deteriorating. When interpreting the inner processes in the country, political scientists usually apply the decomposition of the totalitarian Soviet regime as a framework. This paper suggests a broader framework through an analysis of historical structures anchored in Russian civilization. The key to understanding Russia's foreign policy, I argue, is rooted in the imperial syndrome associated with the country's history, whether one considers the tsarist, Soviet, or post-Soviet periods. At present, Russia's desire to restore its status as a world power, as in the past, requires it to develop a foreign policy secured by control of its nearest neighbors. For centuries, it purchased their loyalty and fealty with natural resources. When this routine was disrupted, for example with a drop in the market prices of raw materials, another practice developed where, in order to maintain its hegemony, Russia used aggression against its nearest neighbors. This approach is sustained by endorsement from the general public that seems oblivious to conditions of unparalleled income inequality in Russia. For them there is nostalgia for the restoration of a super power status for the country. The chief outcome of the study is Russian policies of self-isolation and hybrid wars against its nearest neighbors, which is a contemporary means used to prolong the life of an imagined empire.

Introduction

On November 30, 2016, the United States House of Representatives approved the Intelligence Authorization Bill. Title V of the bill (Matters Relating to Foreign Countries) specified the creation of an interagency committee "to counter active measures by the Russian Federation to exert covert influence over peoples and governments" (Civic Impulse, 2017, p. 53). The matter concerned the disclosure of disinformation and forgeries, funding agents of influence, assassinations, terrorism, and other activities of the kind "carried out in coordination with, or at the behest of, political leaders or the security services of the Russian Federation" (Civic Impulse, 2017, pp. 53-54).

Clearly, a full 180-degree turn in the Russian-American relations was not an instantaneous event. Initially there was little portent of going back to the active phase of the Cold War in U.S. relations with Putin's Russia. After September 11, 2001, Putin was the first to call American President George W. Bush to express his

condolences and to declare his readiness to render assistance in fighting terrorism. Shortly after that, following the announcement by President Bush of the United States' intent to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty (Arms Control Association, 2002), and the International Security Conference in Munich in 2002 (Schwartz, 2002), relations began to take a turn for the worse. Five years later, at the Munich Security Conference of 2007 Putin announced that the unipolar model of the modern world was unacceptable for Russia. He emphasized that Russia "[was] a country with more than a millennial history, and [that] it almost always enjoyed the privilege of conducting an independent foreign policy" (Putin, 2007). Although Russian leadership might perceive NATO membership as consistent with a unipolar vision, in March 2009, Radoslaw Sikorski, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, talked about his desire to see Russia among the NATO member-nations (Gołota & Wroński, 2009). In spite of numerous reservations, such a possibility was also left open by Dmitry Rogozin, the Permanent Representative of the NATO Response Force, in April 2009 (Rogozin, 2009).

The seeming point of no return in the Russian-American relations was passed in March 2014 after the annexation of the Crimea by Russia. In light of perceived United States support for the overthrow of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, the prospects of an anti-Russian government in Ukraine, and the potential loss of Crimean ports for the Russian Black Sea Fleet, Putin justified the actions of Russia as a necessity to protect the population of the Crimea from the repressions and reprisal raids of the Ukrainian radicals (Putin, 2014). According to independent analysts and political writers, such a U-turn in Russia's foreign policy was inevitable (Gudkov, 2016; Klyamkin, 2014). These analysts regard the change as a resort to traditional means, i.e. the use of aggression and conducting hybrid wars against the nearest neighbors, for solving internal problems.

In this article, I will first explore the idea that in its development Russia goes through the cycles of reforms and counter-reforms, which help preserve the historical status quo in Russian society. I will also consider how the consolidation of Russian society is attained by creating the perpetual image of an external enemy. This image appeals to the people's perception of the country as an imperial nation and a world power. "Splendid little wars" against real or imagined enemies give the Russian authorities an opportunity to distract the population from the internal problems. The economy is a major part of this argument. The question of "whether Moscow will be able to handle [this] strategic over-extension, which entails the use of considerable resources while its economy is in bad shape" looms large (Scimia, 2017). Arguably, economic problems in Russia occasionally stem from its intermediate geopolitical and cultural position between the West and the East that at times have impeded trade relations.

Utilizing primarily web-based sources from Russian scholars in order to provide readers with easily accessible references (many of these works are also published in printed form), I will also examine how the characteristics of the cultural core of the Russian civilization that have contributed to its survival for millennia, actually stymie creativity in the 21st century. By reviewing the theories of Russian historians, philosophers, sociologists, and political scientists, and by

analyzing the outcomes of public opinion polls, as well as statistical and economic data, I show that when change does come, it is derivative. This tendency to adapt from external sources bears the seeds of its own destruction due to the persistence of reactionary forces against change in the society. I will conclude with some thoughts about how Russia compensates for its inability to exert "soft power" on its nearest neighbors, and what the country's current development prospects are.

Literature Review

One of the explanatory models of social transformations in the history of Russia is the theory of the "civilizational pendulum" or "cyclic recurrence of history" offered by Bagdasaryan (2010). According to the model, "the direction in which development moves at a particular historical stage is determined by the combination of the innovational and traditional potentials" (Bagdasaryan, 2010, p. 61). When the former potential prevails (often inspired by external forces), the system becomes transformed. Innovations, however, incite rejection and set the countermove of the pendulum mechanism in motion. In this sense, crises can be regarded as the maximum swing points of the pendulum. Thus, "when the maximum of the innovation amplitude has been reached, the vector of the social development inevitably gives way to the opposite one," which leads to the periods of counter reforms in Russia (Bagdasaryan, 2010, pp. 61-62).

The idea that in its development Russia goes through cycles of reforms and counter-reforms is supported by the sociologist Vladimir Lapkin and the political scientist Vladimir Pantin (2007). Their work connects the problem of Russia's image with reactionary domestic and foreign policies developed by the authorities. Policies that the authors single out emphasize the "intermediate," "borderline" geopolitical and cultural position of Russia between the West and the East, whereby "the image of Russia inside and outside the country somehow bifurcates and fluctuates" (Lapkin & Pantin, 2007, pp. 1-2).

Lapkin and Pantin (2007) further argue that during the periods of liberal reforms, Russian society and the state "primarily consider themselves closely connected to European culture, and more broadly to the West," signaling their equality with the "civilized world" (pp. 2-3). At such times, the West tends to perceive Russia as not posing any real threats, though "lagging behind" the civilized world. On the contrary, when the Russian state goes through periods of anti-liberal counter reforms, its "separate identity" and civilizational differences from both the West and the East begin to be emphasized. These are also the times that tend to accentuate Russia's "greatpowerness, uniqueness, imperial might" as well as its "special messianic role in the world process (Lapkin and Pantin, 2007, p. 3). At such moments the West sees Russia "largely as an independent, but hostile and unpredictable nation whose political and economic life is significantly different from life in western countries" (p. 3). Relatedly, Bagdasaryan (2010) highlights a set of indicators that directly lead to an increase in external aggression. Those are the level of national focus versus the level of cosmopolitism; the etatism paradigm (the popularity of the strong state concept); the propaganda actualization of the

external enemy image (the West), and the nature of defining Russia's historical mission, among others (Bagdasaryan, 2010, p. 64).

The historian Alexander Akhiezer (1995) regarded Russia as having an intermediate position between liberal and traditional civilizations (p. 4). In its historic development Russia stepped over the bounds of a traditional civilization characterized by static reproduction, i.e. the type of reproduction under which quantitative changes in society and culture are possible only at the expense of attracting additional resources. However, Russia did not manage to become a full-fledged part of Western liberal civilization where the dominant position is held by intensive reproduction fueled by innovation. Situated between such forces, societal dynamics acquired a conflict-ridden, self-destructive character which Akhiezer (1995) called "cleavage" (p. 6).

Cleavage is "a pathological condition of society" characterized by a vicious circle, which means that if progressive values in one of the two parts of the cleaved society are activated, in the other part traditional forces are brought into action, and vice versa (Akhiezer, 1995, p. 6). Akhiezer (1995) argues that the two opposing parts in the cleaved society (progressive values vs. traditional values) act in the opposite directions and thus paralyze and disorganize each other (p. 6).

In a cleavage-based society any attempts to substitute alternative decisions for those just taken may form the so-called "lame decisions" (Akhiezer, 1995, p. 32). The latter are characterized by simplification–a tendency to solve not what needs to be solved, but what can be solved according to the understanding of the authorities (Akhiezer, 1995, p. 34). This tendency coincides with Herbert Simon's idea of "satisficing." Satisficing refers to making decisions, which are just good enough in terms of some criterion (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2009, p. 348). Lame decisions make the authorities "pursue a 'satisficing' path, a path that will permit satisfaction at some specified level of all of [their] needs" (Simon, 1956, p. 136). The project *Novorossia* envisaging the creation of a confederative union of the unrecognized Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics may serve as an example in this case. At the initial stage (May 2014), it was actively supported by the Kremlin. However, having encountered resistance on the part of the West and the impossibility of spreading the Donetsk-Lugansk experience over the contiguous regions of Ukraine, the project was closed a year later.

According to the Russian historian Nikolai Berdyaev (2007), the immense space of Russia subjugates the "Russian soul" instead of emancipating it (p. 115). Organization of the vast space into the greatest state in the world was paid for by over-centralization, "submission of life to the state's interests, and suppression of any independent forces, personal as well as public" (Berdyaev, 2007, p. 114). Berdyaev (2007) wrote the collection of articles, *The Destiny of Russia (1914-1917)*, before the end of World War I. He hoped that the war would lead to "a radical change in the consciousness of the Russian people" (Berdyaev, 2007, p. 120). They would disengage from the power of space, and instead get control over it. This would allow them to radically change their attitude to the state and culture. Instead of being their master, the state should become "the inner power of the Russian people" (Berdyaev, 2007, p. 120). As for culture, in the opinion of Berdyaev (2007),

it was supposed to become "more intensive" (p. 120). Without such a change "the Russian people cannot have a future … and the state is exposed to the threat of disintegration" (Berdyaev, 2007, p. 120). The philosopher's hopes were not destined to be realized. During the 20th century the state disintegrated twice. That is why the fight for Russia's global status still remains a main factor in the process of consolidation for an atomized people who never managed (not without the assistance of the state) to acquire the skills of collective action.

The problem of consolidation is pertinent to any society that has transitioned from a traditional civilization to a liberal one. However, for Russia which is stuck in-between, it is exacerbated by the cleavage or tensions between innovation and tradition, between foreign and domestic. To overcome it, it is necessary to reach a basic consensus between the conflicting cultures and their bearers, further providing legitimacy to the state power (Akhiezer, Klyamkin, & Yakovenko, 2013, p. 45). In early states, the legitimacy of the ruling stratum was determined by how successful it was at coping with the protection of its subjects from external threats, and by its ability to annex new territories. That is why "victories in wars were a powerful source of the state power legitimacy" (Akhiezer et al., 2013, p. 44). In the words of Akhiezer, Klyamkin, and Yakovenko (2013), "the fall of European monarchies (German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian) … during WW I proved that the ancient mechanism when power could be legitimized by means of victories and de-legitimized by means of defeats continued to exist even millennia later" (p. 44). These authors also contend that "the state consolidation through the image of an enemy–real or simulated–has not been eliminated until now" (Akhiezer et al., 2013, p. 44). Therefore, victories in wars gave Russia an opportunity to establish and support its notion of imperial might legitimizing the ruling elite.

Wars, however, could also be "a specific means to obscure internal problems, which under the condition of peace reveal[ed] their intractability and insolvability … and the hidden cracks of the socio-cultural cleavage" (Akhiezer et al., 2013, p. 45). Also, the vast expanse of the Russian territory did not require much investment from its inhabitants. It has always been possible for the state to secure additional resources to enhance production in society making innovation unnecessary or at least less attractive. Nevertheless, Russia's position as an intermediary civilization forced the country to go through cycles of reforms and counter-reforms in the course of its history. The periods of reforms drew Russia nearer to the "civilized world," i.e. to the Western European culture, whereas the periods of counter-reforms incited in the population the ideas of Russia's uniqueness and aspirations for the country's messianic role in the world.

Analysis

In the remaining part of my article I will show how and why the population of Russia currently tends to support the aggressive foreign policy of the Kremlin. The following analysis of public opinion polls and of the statistical and economic data shows that while previously the Russian authorities ensured support of constituents by improving their well-being, the main focus of the current domestic policy is to

create an image of an external enemy (or enemies). This helps politicians to distract the masses from recognizing that Russia has been unable to create a competitive economy. By involving the population in foreign policy endeavors, which propel dangerous dreams about the restoration of the country's former greatness and status as a world power, elites are trying to divert the people's attention from the fact that the Russian economy is currently suffering from three ongoing crises (Mirkin, 2017). The first one is the investment crisis; the second is connected with the drop in the population's real income that continues for the fourth consecutive year; the third is the overpriced Russian ruble, which may become devalued at any moment. In addition, the modern Russian economy is still mostly extractive, which makes Russia "a great state of raw materials" unable to compete with either "the Asian electronic 'tigers'" or other developed countries of the world (Mirkin, 2017).

Negative Mobilization

In his book *Negative Identity* (2004), the Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov noted the following, "Consolidation of the Russians happens not on the basis of positive ideas … but on the solidarity of repulsion, denial, and demarcation. It is a deep cultural circumstance rather than manifestation of an opportunistic potential of collective mobilization" (p. 156). Therefore, the most important condition for the reproduction of the negative identity is the presence of the image of an "enemy" (an "alien"). It affixes wholeness and stability to the national identity. Gudkov provides a useful theory about how negative mobilization forms. He identifies three conditions conducive to the forming of mobilization waves in the Russian society. First of all, negative mobilization begins only when the differentiation and sophistication of the social system reaches such a degree under which the commanding top begins to lose control over what is going on. Secondly, under such conditions the processes of structured changes turn out to be blocked by the interests of some influential groups. Thirdly, the intellectual elite degenerate since they become little other than bureaucrats serving the regime (Gudkov, 2004, p. 484).

The data in Table 1 help assess the effectiveness of Russia's aggressive foreign policy with respect to the perception of the political elite by the population of the country. The coercive annexation of the Crimea had a positive impact on Putin's rating, although many remained relatively low.

The first column shows the results of the survey which was conducted under the conditions of a deep economic crisis five months before the default.[1] Public opinion perceived the authorities of Yeltsin's call-out as corrupted (63%) and alien to the people (41%). During the "fat" years of Putin's rule the population's

[1] The sovereign default occurred in Russian on August 17, 1998. The main reasons for the default (the inability to service some or all the country's fiscal obligations) were as follows: an enormous state debt; low world prices for raw materials, which made the basis of the Russian export; the peanut politics of the state; the establishment by the state of the Ponzi scheme, which refers to a fraudulent investing scam; and the meltdown of the Asian economies.

perception of the authorities improved, but not significantly or in all categories. Comparing the data in the last two columns it is necessary to keep in mind that by November 2016 the real income of the population had been decreasing for 24 consecutive months. Nevertheless, the share of Russians characterizing the authorities in a negative way substantially decreased.

Table 1

Please name the traits that in your opinion characterize the current authorities (percentage of the number of respondents)[2]

	March 1998	November 2012	**November 2016**
Corrupted	63	52	**31**
Bureaucratic	22	30	**26**
Legitimate	12	8	**23**
Alien to the people	41	32	**23**
Strong, firm	2	10	**19**
'Ours,' habitual	3	4	**11**
Authoritative, respected	2	6	**11**

Note. Adapted from Levada-Center (2016a).

The figures in the last column support the idea of Akhiezer et al. (2013) about wars being a convenient means for the authorities to distract the population from internal problems (p. 45). Russian rulers have always skillfully played the strings of the people's "deeply-rooted patriotic sentiment" knowing for centuries that the population possessed "a strong resilience to material shortages" (Scimia, 2017). Thus, the events in Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimea turned out to be a consolidating factor for the Russian society, at least for the time being. However, the countdown of shaping the current mobilization wave should be taken not from March 2014 and the annexation, but from the end of 2011 when in response to mass protests against rigging the election outcomes, the Kremlin began to renew the policy of societal consolidation (in opposition to external threats). The central element of the new policy became the anti-West rhetoric.

[2] The survey was conducted on November 18-21, 2016, using an all-Russian representative sampling of the urban and rural population. The number of respondents equaled 1,600 people aged 18 and older. The survey was conducted at respondents' homes using face-to-face interviews. The six answer options given in the table were the most popular ones in November 2016.

The beginning of Vladimir Putin's third presidential term (March 2012) coincided with a sharp slowdown in the economic growth, which served as an additional incentive to form an image of an enemy. The dynamics of answering the question, "Are things in Russia going in the right direction or are the events leading us nowhere?" illustrate the connection between the external "splendid little wars" and positive assessments by mass consciousness of the state of affairs inside the country (Levada Center, 2016b, p. 33). The two most important peaks of positive assessments were recorded in August 2008 ("peace-enforcement of Georgia"), and after the annexation of the Crimea in March 2014.

State Cultural Policy

In December 2014, Putin approved *Foundations of the State Cultural Policy* (FSCP) decree. The document consists of 72 pages. The word "civilization" is mentioned in it 30 times. According to the authors of the document, Russia is a unique and authentic civilization, which reduces itself to neither "the West" nor "the East" (FSCP, 2015, p. 30). It is a bridge between the neighbors on "the left" and on "the right" (FSCP, 2015, p. 30). Civilizational authenticity is secured by means of transferring from generation to generation the traditional values, norms, mores, and patterns of the country's behavior (FSCP, 2015, pp. 26, 44). It is identified as a priority of the cultural and humanitarian development (FSCP, 2015, p. 9). At the same time, there was no space in the voluminous document to articulate the content of "civilizational authenticity" (FSCP, 2015, p. 3). The only exception was Russian mentality. Its main characteristic was a pronounced priority of the spiritual over material (FSCP, 2015, p. 31). The absence of any detailed description of the FSCP characteristics is evidence of the declarative nature of the document that presages a propaganda campaign for confrontation with the "other," specifically Western Europe and the United States.

Thus, a concise wording of the document's main thesis would be "Russia is not Europe" (Bershidsky, 2014). Although Putin has mentioned it many times in his speeches that Russia had civilizational differences with the West, according to Bershidsky (2014), the FSCP officially enshrined Russia's "rejection of the European path and of universal values such as democratic development and tolerance toward different cultures" (n.p.).

Three factors seem to come into play with respect to "Russia's non-European path" (Bershidsky, 2014). First of all, it is a quest for security from terrorist attacks, as well as from internal breakdown, and a perceived threat from the West. Secondly, it is Russia's sense of uniqueness with its growing rejection of Western values and the idea that "Russian civilization can develop along the lines of a limited federation of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus" (Johnson, 2014). Finally, it is an imbedded ideology growing out of Russia's vastness that centralized governance is necessary, accepted, and even preferred, which in turn contributes to greater police powers on the part of the state.

The Russian Economy

The central idea of the cultural program seems to be accurate–Russia is a separate civilization. This distinct civilization has survived over the course of its millennial history thanks to this identity. In the article *The Clash of Civilizations?* Samuel Huntington (1993) stated that when the Cold War ended and ideological division of Europe disappeared, the region became divided in a cultural way (p. 29). The division now was between Western Christianity, on the one hand, and Orthodox Christianity and Islam on the other (pp. 29-30) The important dividing line in Europe "may well be the eastern boundary of Western Christianity in the year 1500" (Huntington, 1993, p. 30). Thus, the peoples who live to the north and west of this line are either Protestants or Catholics. In the course of their history they went through the same stages as other Western European countries, i.e. feudalism, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution (Huntington, 1993, p. 30). They were also generally better off than those who lived to the east. Therefore, Huntington (1993) predicted that those peoples would "look forward to increasing involvement in a common European economy and to the consolidation of democratic political systems" (p. 30). The Orthodox and Muslim peoples to the east and south of the line "were only lightly touched by the shaping events in the rest of Europe; [were] generally less advanced economically; [and] seemed much less likely to develop stable political systems" (pp. 30-31). In full compliance with Huntington's logic, the three former Baltic republics of the Soviet Union focused on the integration with Europe, and "quickly evolved into genuine and, in many respects, liberal democracies" (Diamond, 2008, p. 190). The six republics with predominantly Muslim populations reverted to sultanic-like regimes with strong individual rulers. The six Orthodox republics proclaimed commitment to the principles of democracy on the forefront of the Perestroika euphoria; however, they did not manage to realize them consistently in practice. Eventually, with the exception of the Baltic States, all other former Soviet republics and "most prominently Russia … regressed from democratic possibilities or reestablished dictatorship without communism" (Diamond, 2008, p. 190).

The authors of FSCP, however, consider the cultural peculiarity of Russia as the guarantor of the Russian statehood stability and competitiveness (FSCP, 2015 p. 49). Official economic statistics, on the contrary, do not confirm the presence of such competitiveness. Modern Russia, just like the Soviet Union before it, suffers from what Larry Diamond (2008) called "the exceptional curse of oil" (p. 74). Already the economy of the Soviet Union after the discovery of the oil and gas fields in Western Siberia began to sweepingly acquire the structure characteristic of a petro-state. Therefore, it is not by accident that "the largest geopolitical catastrophe" of the 20th century started in 1985 after an almost six-fold drop in oil prices (Putin, 2005).

The modern Russian economy has been substantially dependent on oil prices as well. In the words of the program director of Moscow Carnegie Center Movchan (2017), in Russia in 2008 the correlation between the changes in oil prices made up between 90% and 95% of the changes in the GDP growth rate, the federal budget

income, and the size of reserves (p. 5). According to the Russian Ministry of Finance, in 2014, 35.4% of the federal budget revenue came directly from the export of petroleum. Value-added tax received from selling imported goods, most of which (92%) were paid for with the money received from exporting raw materials, made up additional 15% of the budget (Movchan, 2017, p. 7). Also, taxes, levies, and payments for natural resources equaled 20% of the budget, with excise and other duties on imported goods adding another 13%. Altogether, in 2014, "83.4% of the federal budget income was made up by the revenue from the extraction and export of raw materials" (Movchan, 2017, p. 7).

It would be a mistake to think that an increase in the general income of the Russian population occurred because the state managed to create a competitive industrial sphere. The increase should be first accounted for by the export of oil, the extraction of which makes up about 20% of the Russian GDP. Another factor explaining the increase in the income is the outpacing consumption growth, which is fueled by trade "blown out of proportions due to the huge petrodollars flow of import" (Movchan, 2017, p. 6). Citing the data of the Federal Service of State Statistics (Rosstat), Movchan (2017) indicated that by 2014 Russia was importing from 85% to 95% of production means, and from 50% to 70% of consumption goods (p. 6).

A growth in the income of the Russians during the 2000s did not contradict such a roll back as it was ensured mainly at the expense of the raw material rent. The latter, however, is threatened today not only by the unfavorable demand-supply situation but also by the deepening technological underrun. The methods of oil extraction used in Russia are inefficient from the point of view of oil recovery factor, which is on average 30% lower today than in the United States and is slowly decreasing, whereas in the United States it is slowly growing. The maximum possible extraction in Russia will decline and, according to some estimates, will dwindle at least two times by 2035 (Poddubny, 2011, pp. 85-103).

Russia's rejection of a planned economy and the shift to the market were supposed to promote the development of knowledge intensive branches of industry. In practice, however, the situation was reversed. According to the data of the Russian Machine-Building Portal (2013), for the last 20 years the production of processing units in Russia decreased almost 20 times: from 70,000 to 3,000. They assert that the decline should be attributed to the political events that led to the change in the country's economic set-up in the 1990s, which "made most of the machine-tool building enterprises in Russia bankrupt or put them on the verge of bankruptcy" (Machine-Building Portal, 2013).

Machine building, however, is the core of modern industry. It is impossible to create a modern economy without it. That is why the federal program National Technological Base adopted in 2006 and intended for the time frame of 2007-2011 was specifically earmarked to breathe new life into such an important branch of industry (Government, 2007). The program did not produce the expected outcome, and could not produce it. This is a direct consequence of Russia's inability to introduce quantitative changes into the economy by means of innovation. The situation was also aggravated by the brain drain from the country and the overall

low ranking of most Russian universities. According to a report by Russia's Committee of Civil Initiatives, human capital is actively leaving the country, and the "quality losses due to emigration that the domestic human capital is experiencing are significant and cannot be replenished at the expense of external resources" (Vorobieva & Grebeniuk, 2016, p. 25). Only between 2002 and 2011, 93,000 Russians with degrees emigrated from the Russian Federation (Vorobieva & Grebeniuk, 2016, p. 25). This process of washing out the most "educated, proactive and motivated" citizens continues (Abramov, 2016). Also, according to the 2017 ShanghaiRanking Academic Ranking of 500 world's top universities, Russia's best university (Lomonosov Moscow State University) ranked 93 (ARWU, 2017). Its second best higher education establishment, Saint Petersburg State University, found itself 400th (ARWU, 2017). Therefore, the absence of a competitive industrial sphere and the non-competitiveness of the Russian economy were not aided by government policy. Policies that isolate Russia from the world community of nations are counter-productive. Over-reliance on natural resources and military force are also misguided. Russia's government and leadership have been astute at capitalizing on traditional fears and mistrust of the other, strategies that have long been employed in Russia to its own detriment.

In April 1985, Gorbachev began Perestroika with "uskoreniye," which can be translated into English as "acceleration." The term refers to the initial stage of Gorbachev's reforms when the Soviet government was trying to expedite the social and economic development of the country, thus acknowledging that the USSR had been lagging behind the Western countries in that respect. The machine manufacturing industry was supposed to play the central role in the process of acceleration of the economic development, propelling a quick switch to totally new technologies. The outcome of the attempt was illustrated by the examples cited above. There is no quick fix and yet people are impatient. Russia's leadership has tended to opt for the expedient low hanging options over the hard work of human resource development and partnership building. Twenty-five years of the contemporary history of the Russian Federation reflects 25 years of accelerated de-industrialization. That is why the breakaway from the industrially developed countries is growing with every passing year.

Consolidation without "soft power"

The practice of consolidating periphery around the imperial core at the expense of redistribution of the natural resource rent is centuries-old. Let us consider the Soviet period. In her book *To Feed and to Govern: About Power in Russia in the 16th through 20th Centuries*, Tamara Kondratieva (2006) shows on numerous examples how beginning with the Middle Ages, when Russian feudal lords would give their noble servants lands "to feed" upon them, the concept of "feeding" emerged (p. 7). "Governing" the lands was secondary. Thus, according to the Russian historian Kluchevsky, in the Russian history the formation of power relationships happened in this order: first came feeding, then governing (Kondratieva, 2006, p. 7).

The tradition continued into the modern times when the new symbiotic formation of the party-state became the only owner of the country's riches and distributor of the material benefits. The "owner" determined his monopoly power at the individual level, in the first place, by means of distributing produce and manufactured goods depending on the social status, labor significance, and political orientation of citizens (Kondratieva, 2006). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the "feeding" practice transformed into purchasing the loyalty of the periphery with the help of natural resources by the imperial core. If purchasing the loyalty of its nearest neighbors was not feasible, Russia resorted to such pressuring means as direct threats and military interventions. Russia has to employ either of the options because it simply does not possess soft power, if one understands by it "getting others to want what you want" by means of "cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions" (Nye, 1990, p. 167).

The diverse relations between Russia and its nearest neighbors are examples of different degrees of success and failure of the feeding/purchasing practice. Russia, for instance, was not able to hold the Baltic States in its sphere of influence by means of the pre-dosed "feeding." That is why the latter opted for NATO umbrella to retain their independence. In the cases of Ukraine and Georgia, the refusal to exchange one's loyalty for "feeding" resulted in Russia exercising military power to keep the former Soviet republics within its circle of influence.

The union state of Belarus and Russia may serve, however, as an example of efficiency of "feeding." Its history (founded on April 2, 1997) is first of all the history of oil and gas trade "wars" whose essence boils down to the struggle of political elites for the "fair" distribution of the resource rent. The last trade war, unprecedented with respect to its duration, had started in the summer of 2016 and ended only in April of 2017. The reason for noncompliance is self-explanatory. The drop in the world prices for energy supply considerably decreased the subsidizing abilities of the Russian budget. For Lukashenko, the head of the Belarusian state, the present level of subsidies means the loss of social and political stability in the country.

Although Russia is unable to recruit allies from its immediate circle with "soft power," it nevertheless aspires to "the world cultural expansion" (FSCP, 2015, p. 39). The official civilizational optimism recorded by FSCP finds neither understanding nor support from the majority of liberal-minded Russians. They call for reforming the state and its base institutions towards more inclusive, empowering democratic institutions and market economy. For instance, here are the suggestions of the politician and economist Yavlinsky (2017) that he enumerated in his article on the outcomes of the latest Gaidar Forum:

- changing the domestic and foreign policy, abolition of repressive laws, emancipation of mass media, and fence-mending with the nearest neighbors and the rest of the world;
- emancipation and encouragement of entrepreneurial initiative;

- creation of favorable institutional environment for business that would presuppose opportunities for business to legally and openly participate in the political life of the country;
- provision of maximally competitive environment in all spheres; and
- forming of the so-called "development institutes" whose task would be to encourage long-term investment, and using for this purpose the largest part of the state's rent income.

For Yavlinsky (2017), there is "overconcentration of power, [with] its non-transparency and irremovability, and the absence of political competition, checks and balances." All these obstacles turn the implementation of reforms into mission impossible.

One may, however, argue about the efficiency of such obvious suggestions. The overconcentration of the Russian power did not come from nowhere. As it was rightly noted by the historian Vladimir Buldakov (2007), power in Russia is "a derivative from the people's ideas about it" (p. 22). The way it is formed is difficult to grasp from the sociological point of view (Buldakov, 2007, p. 22). That is why any attempts at reforming the Russian state by virtue of direct impact on power are a priori doomed to failure.

Conclusion

On the one hand, in its domestic policy Russia puts a premium on the struggle for retaining traditional values, which is an unmistakable sign of the loss of the historical dynamics, i.e. change. Culture is not static. Russia's foreign policy, on the other hand, is anchored by control of its nearest neighbors. Having gone through the disintegration of the empire, the former imperial nation suffers from the wounded grandeur complex, which makes it an easy prey for politicians willing to draw the people in dangerous foreign policy enterprises. Being unable to exert "soft power" on the immediate neighbors, Russia compensates for it in two ways: by either purchasing the loyalty of the regimes ready to sacrifice part of their sovereignty in exchange for economic subsidies (Belarus, Armenia), or by the direct military interference (Georgia, Ukraine).

The idea of a super power has indeed proved to be much-in-demand for the masses. Therefore, one of the country's prospects is the continuation of the self-isolation policy (de facto or chosen), coupled with hybrid wars. This policy, however, limits Russia's potential for development by stifling the ingenuity of citizens' entrepreneurial spirit. Although it may help prolong the life of an imagined empire, in reality it does not contribute to Russia's greatness. Another choice for Russia could be the transformation into a liberal civilization, which will most probably demand a change in civilizational identity, as well as the acceptance of universal values such as respect for human rights and dignity, and so on. Time will show whether Russia will choose innovation over tradition, or vice versa; and whether it will attempt to join the "civilized world" yet again, or will continue to lead a wretched existence on the historic sidelines.

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