Russia and the EU in a Multipolar World: Invoking the Global in Russian Terms

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Introduction

Over the past decade, Russia's relations with the European Union have evolved from competition to conflict. With the Ukraine crisis as a culmination point, many scholars explain the conflictual stand-off as a result of a long-term crisis rooted in the internal structure of EU–Russia interaction (Casier 2016; Chaban et al. 2017; Haukkala 2015). While such a perspective contributes to a better understanding of the conflict, there is more to the confrontational dynamics between the two sides. World politics can be traced back not only to the pursuit of national interests, but also to differing ways of envisioning the world. To a considerable extent, the current conflict with Russia is a conflict of worldviews. In line with the theme of this volume, the following chapter takes this epistemic dimension of world politics seriously. The world and the global are not fixed realms but are constituted in the practices of concrete actors who create their discursive horizons of the world and the global through symbolic representations, narratives and models. This chapter, therefore, focuses on practices of worldmaking inherent in Russian foreign policy discourse. Retracing popular modes of mapping the world from the Russian perspective, I will show how a multipolar worldview informs the relationship between Russia and the Western world.

Russian foreign policy discourse is greatly affected by major trends and trajectories under way in world politics. Russia finds itself in an increasingly dynamic global environment. The world is more volatile and uncertain today than at any time since the fall of the Berlin Wall. In a broad sense, 'disorder', 'breakdown', 'the rise of the rest', 'post-West', 'post-liberal' and even 'post-truth' (D'Ancona 2017) have become widespread mantras of the day rampantly used by global elites to define the magnitude and potential trajectories

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839455296-012 - am 13.02.2026, 05:16:53. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

of the shifting global context. In addition, Russia's immediate international environment is also dynamic – sometimes more so than Russia itself – politically, economically and demographically. With the EU in flux, China on the rise, and the US-led liberal world shaken, what challenges does such a world subject to fluid change present to Russia? How does Moscow's perception of global change shape its approach to interaction with the EU? To deal with these questions, this chapter argues that it is crucial to explore Moscow's long-standing normative thinking: a doctrine of a 'multipolar world', centred on the principle of balance of power. This multiplex edifice of views underpins Russia's contemporary understandings of the global political space and is thus relevant to its perceptions of the EU.

Moscow's conservative turn

Moscow's current mode of envisioning of the world and the global must be put into the context of a broader policy shift. This new policy course is marked by the so-called 'conservative turn', also called a 'Eurasianist' or 'civilizationalist' turn, an important dimension of which is re-envisioning the world order. On the one hand, there is a sense of uncertainty accompanied by a mixture of concern and excitement about what Russian politicians describe as a global shift of power. The rhetoric in Moscow remains mired in the spirit of the 'decline of the West'. Some Russian leaders run to overgeneralizations that 'the rise of the rest' and the 'shift of global power to the East' is an inevitable course of history. Looking forward to these global transformations, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov says that 'after five or so centuries of domination of the collective West, as it were, it is not very easy to adjust to new realities that there are other powerhouses. It is not Russia that is shaping this world order, it is history. It is the [global] development itself' (Lavrov 2018b). According to policy experts Sergey Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov (2018), there is 'no way Russia can avoid or sit out this process', or else whatever new world is created, 'it will be created without Russia, or even against it'. Russian president Vladimir Putin claims that 'it is now being decided how the world will look in the future, in the coming decades. Will this be a world of monologue and the rule of force, or a world of dialogue and mutual respect?' (Kremlin 2018).

In this narrative, the EU 'has failed to create a politically unified space capable of acting in concert on the international stage and is unlikely to achieve this in the future' (Bordachev 2019). It is 'certainly fighting to make sure that

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it is not lost in this new world order' (Lavrov 2018b), but 'the ability of Brussels to influence this world is waning' (Kortunov 2019a). In Russian political circles, there is a proverbial saying: 'Europe is an economic giant, but a political dwarf.' This attitude lingers in the air. If previously the EU was portrayed as a difficult but still indispensable partner for a host of reasons including Russia's own 'modernization', over the past decade the paradigm has shifted from inferiority to superiority, to estrangement and even to a certain sense of indifference. Russia and the European Union are 'certainly not in confrontation—unlike Russia and the United States. They are, however, experiencing estrangement and, in some cases, alienation' (Trenin 2019).

In matters of world politics, the EU is perceived as impotent due to its technocratic inertia and resultant inability to respond effectively to the challenges of the dynamic world and, worse still, to its increasing dependence on 'Atlanticist moods' in matters of strategic importance, to its own disadvantage. In effect, what is questioned is not the role that the EU could play globally as 'one of the independent poles', but its very ability to recompose itself in a timely manner in order to play that role. Adding to these, there is a sense that the European project is in deep crisis – a perception buttressed by the rise of anti-Brussels sentiment in a number of European countries. The EU was 'struggling internally even as international relations … entered a period of unusually high turbulence. The sharp turn in U.S. policy has made the breakdown of the international order … an irreversible process. That order was most suited to European interests and its collapse poses a serious challenge not only to the philosophy of European foreign policy, but also to Europe's worldview' (Trenin 2019). But there is 'not much that Russians can realistically expect from Europeans. Despite their valiant efforts, they [European leaders] will not turn the EU into a geopolitical and strategic counterweight to the United States. They will probably not produce leaders of the stature of not only de Gaulle, Brandt, and Churchill, but even of Chirac, Kohl, and Thatcher' (ibid.).

By contrast, Moscow is and must be ready for 'creative participation' in the global transformation. Imbued with a powerful sense of righteousness, Russia 'will remain a country that is able to ensure its survival' either with support from allies or, if necessary, all on its own (Bordachev 2019) or even as a 'lonely power' (Shevtsova 2010; see also the chapter by Sergei Akopov in this volume). The major challenge Russia faces today is to reinvent itself as an indispensable global player. This is obviously a long-term vision that surpasses the time frame of the current presidential term. However, in Moscow's eyes

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the process has already started. The Western liberal order is waning as it is losing its monopoly over 'universal' norms and values, and the centre of gravity in world affairs is shifting to the non-West. According to a widespread view, the emerging world order should 'fully reflect the changing balance of powers and the existing West-centred institutions should either undergo a profound transformation or be replaced by more universal, more inclusive and more representative organizations' (Ivanov 2019). The world should 'fully reject the concept of Western (i.e. liberal) universalism in favor of developmental pluralism', and the emerging concept of modernity should 'imply opportunities for preserving national traditions, culture, specific economic, social and cultural models distinctly different from the Western examples' (ibid.). At times Hobbesian and at other times Lockean, Moscow's worldview is crucial, and it is to its ideological roots that I now turn.

Multipolar world

From the Russian perspective, two paradigms can be distinguished that oppose each other in contemporary world politics. One is believed to advocate cultural, economic and political globalization conducted under the guidance of the Western world, including the EU. The other, which Russia itself advocates, is a more particularistic approach that calls for 'a balance of interests, multiplicity of politico-cultural forms and multiple centers of international influence' (Chebankova 2017: 1). The latter worldview – multipolarity – has been reinforced as Russia's main world political view advanced in the international arena. Its proponents claim that such a conception of world politics can only have 'a dialogical character, in contrast to the unipolar world order that is mostly based on the normative monolog of liberal democratic states' (ibid.). According to this view, the European Union, by proclaiming the ideas of democracy, individual freedoms and human rights as the main principles of its foreign policy, 'imposes these on everyone else, not caring much about how this may affect people of other cultures. European pretensions of "universality" do not allow for a dialogue with "others"'. In these conditions, 'normal diplomacy as an art of compromises is impossible' (Tsygankov 2018).

In what follows, I will explore the *geopolitical*, *historical* and *civilizational* dimensions of this worldview while contextualizing their implications within Russia's self–other-definitional discourse towards the EU. In doing so, I follow the line of argumentation that the underlying justifications of sovereignty

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and the balance of power retain their centrality to an understanding of Russia's EU discourse – also in its global context. As genealogical repertoires of foreign policy thinking, the concepts of sovereignty and the balance of power largely inform Russia's relationship with the EU. As we will see, these concepts also underlie a set of deep-seated convictions and beliefs about the nature of Russia's role and its relationship to the wider world.

Geopolitical mappings

Multipolarity is a *geopolitical* concept centred in the idea of the balance of power essential to Russia's self-identification as a sovereign power in world politics. In grossly oversimplified terms, this implies that if there is no balance of power, there is no full sovereignty. It is by virtue of history and geography that it is an imperative for a country such as Russia to maintain full sovereignty over its domestic as well as foreign policy. The concept is most often associated with the figure of Yevgeny Primakov (1929–2015), a veteran Russian politician, diplomat, architect and arch-representative of this worldview. According to this concept, Russia should be an independent centre of power and a crucial global player with its own understanding of the world order and should build a foreign policy based on its own strategy, and not just in conformity with or opposition to someone else's worldview (Primakov 1996). From this perspective, major powers see the world through their own lenses and cognitive maps: America's *neoliberalism*, Europe's *normative power* and China's *tianxia*. Russia is no exception. The main factor influencing Russia's world political attitude is a desire to feel less like the periphery of Europe and more like the independent centre of Eurasia. Primakov's legacy was to strengthen the multi-vector nature of Russian foreign policy, essentially abandoning the unilateral orientation to the West that prevailed in the first half of the 1990s. Primakov put forward a plan for the development of a strategic triangle taking in Russia, China and India as a practical mechanism for promoting global multipolarity, a concept that later led to the establishment of BRICS. He argued against the expansion of NATO into Central and Eastern Europe and in favour of creating a new European security architecture for a reunited continent without dividing lines. All these ideas laid the foundation for Russia's foreign policy formulation for the subsequent period.[1] The principles he formulated alongside the notion of multipolarity have since then constituted the basis of Russia's foreign policy concept, including its 2016 version (ERFUKNI 2013; MFARF 2016). These principles entail the pursuit of national

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interests, pragmatism and a multidirectional policy that suggests a readiness to cooperate with any country around the world where there is a reciprocal willingness based on mutual respect, equality and a balance of interests.

Although framed in these terms, the world according to Moscow is characterized at the same time by great power politics in which it is predominantly these 'major powers' that lay down the rules of the international order, 'acknowledge' and 'respect' each other's 'national interests' as a 'sphere of privileged interests' and, while they may compete with one another, also cooperate to uphold the global order. It is a world where smaller actors need to know their place for their own good and tolerate a tacit restriction on their sovereignty. According to proponents of multipolarity, a vast majority of existing nation-states are simply not able to independently ensure even their own security and economic growth, not to mention any significant contribution to the formation of a new world order. Thus, in both the present and future multipolar world, only a handful of countries – the major powers – have 'real sovereignty'. President Vladimir Putin stated this view of the world in his speech at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on 2 June 2017: 'There are not so many countries that have sovereignty. Russia treasures its sovereignty, but not as a toy. We need sovereignty to protect our interests and to ensure our own development. India has sovereignty; China is such a country; but not many' (Kremlin 2017). As for the European Union, Russia would like to see 'a responsible international player capable of pursuing an independent foreign policy in the interests of European nations' (Lavrov 2018a). For Russia, the European Union 'as a political actor has a positive meaning when a united Europe appears as a subject sovereign with respect to the United States, an independent center of power. […] in the foreseeable future this condition is not feasible in practice' (Trenin 2018).

It seems the Russian officials do not so much lament the EU's acting on geopolitical motives, rather they deplore exactly the opposite – the EU's not being sufficiently geopolitically mindful. The Russian elites do not hide their surprise at how little autonomy and decisive leadership Europe really exercises when it comes to the big decisions in world politics. Lavrov recalled that 'we for some previous years overestimated the independence of the European Union and even big European countries' (Lavrov 2014). Some critics argue that, contained in their 'post-modern ecosystem, Europeans lost their curiosity about how Russia sees the world and its place in it, […] failing to grasp that what they saw as a benevolent power could be viewed by others as a threat' (Krastev and Leonard 2014: 3). What happened to Europeans? They

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are 'largely absent on issues of military security in Europe: their silence in response to Trump's decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty was deafening and very telling' (Trenin 2019). 'The West today is more afraid of plastic bottles than Russian missiles' (Kortunov 2019b).

The Russian discourse on the multipolar world order also reveals its view of the broader structure of European security architecture. Like its envisioning of the global order, Moscow's concept of Europe is multipolar and pluralistic. According to Richard Sakwa, there are two opposing paradigms of European political space envisioned by Brussels and Moscow respectively. The first is a *wider Europe*, 'the idea of the continent centred on the EU and European space is represented as Brussels-focused, with concentric rings emanating from the west European heartlands of European integration' (Sakwa 2015). In Moscow's view, the paradigm of a *wider Europe* is not, in reality, truly European. It is Atlanticist, that is, deeply embedded in the Atlantic community. The EU-centred wider Europe is becoming absorbed into the Atlantic system, jeopardizing its own normative foundations and lending its policies a geopolitical dynamic that the EU was established precisely in order to transcend (ibid). More than a cosmetic update, European leaders face the historic task of rethinking the entire 'European project' because it is becoming less and less European (Kortunov 2018a).

The second paradigm, according to Sakwa, is based on the idea of a *greater Europe*. This would be a continent united in its systemic diversity. Instead of an EU-centred Europe, the idea supposes a multipolar continent, with more than one centre and without a single ideological flavour. This is a more pluralistic representation of European space, and draws on a long tradition,[2] including Gorbachev's 'common European home'. The idea of a new European Security Treaty, announced by Dmitry Medvedev in 2008, called for the realization of such a vision – a genuinely inclusive new security order – arguing that new ideas were required to ensure that dividing lines were not once again drawn across the continent. In 2010 in Berlin Putin made a similar plea for a geopolitical unification of all of 'Greater Europe' from Lisbon to Vladivostok, to create a genuine 'strategic partnership' (Putin 2010).

In contrast to the unipolar and exclusive nature of European geopolitical space, the Russian leaders take the multipolar and inclusive nature of Asia as a positive example. 'As for the multipolar or unipolar nature of Asia, it is not unipolar; we see and understand this very well. The leaders of the Asian countries today have enough common sense to enter precisely this mode of working with each other. And we are ready to work in the same mode with

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everyone' (Kremlin 2016). Unlike relations between Russia and the EU, 'Russian–Chinese relations are a very flexible form of interaction, which the two sides can calibrate and customize depending on the particular area of cooperation. The sides are not constrained by any highly detailed bureaucratic procedures, protracted decision-making mechanisms, limitations of national sovereignty and so on' (Ivanov 2019). The Chinese–Russian partnership is 'not directed against any third countries … has nothing to do with "dividing Eurasia" [and] does not imply relations between a "senior partner" and a "junior partner"' (ibid.). There may be asymmetries in their relations, but 'these asymmetries do not make the relations hierarchical with the leading power imposing its will on the satellite power' (ibid.).

For Russia, China's rise is an illustrative example justifying its view of the emerging multipolar world. Firstly, Chinese experience shows no linear dependence between the effectiveness of economic modernization and political liberalization. China is 'at the vanguard of a global normative revolution, as Western-led conceptions of universal values give ground to competing models of development' (Salin 2011). Secondly, the Kremlin sees China's rise as instrumental in shifting the global centre of gravity from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region. According to Fyodor Lukyanov, Research Director of the Valdai Discussion Club, justification for Moscow's 'shift to the East' has nothing to do with Russia's attitude towards Europe but with

> the objective fact that only a country with solid and acknowledged positions on the Pacific may seek to become a great power in the XXI century. Russia needs to hurl all effort to implement a complex strategy of re-orientation towards Asia Pacific […] as it does not any longer make sense for Russia to keep regarding all its actions through the prism of its relationship with Europe. (Lukyanov 2014a)

Historical imageries

Multipolarity also has a *historical* dimension. This is particularly relevant in the case of Russia, since Russian elites draw on historical imageries in order to justify the need to shape the present-day international order. Historically, Russia has been both a maker and a taker of the rules upon which the international order is based. Adherents of multipolarity in Russia like to refer to the experience of the 'Concert of Europe', but this time not on a European but

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a global scale; the actors are different, but the basic tenets are conceived as similar. Russian foreign policy expert Bobo Lo summarizes the view aptly:

> The great powers determine the arrangements and rules of international politics, and, crucially, abide by them. No single power may be allowed to threaten the status quo or assume disproportionate power – Napoleonic France in the nineteenth century, the United States today, and China in the future. Smaller states know their place, and frame national policies with due regard for the interests of the major powers. The latter do not interfere in one another's domestic affairs. And security – or at least their security – is collective and indivisible. (Lo 2015)

Indeed, the Russian elites use the past to argue how Russia as a great power has contributed to European stability. For example, in Putin's rendering, unlike [the Treaty of] Versailles, concluded without Russia and ultimately leading to the Second World War, Russia's very active participation in Vienna Congress 'secured a lasting peace' and manifested 'generosity and justice' (cf. Kremlin 2013). The Russian view suggests that useful lessons should be learnt from the Concert of Europe, that is, the defeated should not be treated too harshly, and that Russia should not be excluded from the negotiating table.

Given Russia's own active participation and resultant sense of historical pride, it is little wonder that Russian leaders boast of the Congress of Vienna and the concert of European great powers as the standard example of an effective security system. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov refers to it, asserting that 'Russia became a saviour of the international system' at the Congress of Vienna, the formation of which 'led to development of the continent without serious military conflicts for 40 years' (Lavrov 2018c). Sergey Karaganov, one of the leading foreign-policy experts in Russia, has elevated the Vienna system to the status of something worth emulating. '[U]shering in the most glorious era in the history of the European continent', the main reason why the Congress of Vienna worked was that 'the postwar arrangement was relatively fair and did not humiliate France in defeat'. And then he goes to lament that 'there was nothing like the Congress of Vienna following the Cold War, although the solemn language and commitments of the 1990 Paris Charter had the makings of a historic accord for "eternal peace". Now Russia with its globally minded elite, topnotch diplomacy and geographical position can do a lot to help build this world, a new Concert of Nations, for the benefit of itself and its partners' (Karaganov 2015). Another prominent expert, Fyodor Lukyanov, recalls that 'what is needed is precisely a genuine professional

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diplomacy in the spirit of the 19th century, a diplomacy that is familiar from textbooks but whose actual practice has been virtually forgotten' (Lukyanov 2014b).

Some critics contend that the design of the 'European Concert' cannot be replicated under modern global conditions. According to Andrey Kortunov, Director of the Russian International Affairs Council, although the 'European Concert' was fully multipolar and really helped to preserve peace in Europe for a long time, it is impossible today to repeat the experience. Today the situation is completely different. 'In the 21st century, the differences between the great powers affect the foundations of the world order, the basic concepts of international law, and even more general questions – the ideas of justice, legitimacy, the 'big meanings' of history' (Kortunov 2018b). In the author's opinion, there is a simple reason why the 'European Concert' is a naïve example for how the balance of power might be maintained in the contemporary world. And this reason is the flexibility characteristic to the great powers of the past: Great European powers could afford the luxury of promptly changing the configuration of unions, coalitions, and alliances to maintain the overall balance of the system.

> Could we imagine such flexibility today? Could we suppose that over the course of two or three years, Russia would be capable of swapping its current partnership with China for an alliance with the United States? Or that the European Union, as it faces increasing pressure from the United States, would re-orient itself towards strategic cooperation with Moscow? Such scenarios look improbable at best and absurd at worst. (ibid.)

Kortunov argues that 'the magnificent multipolar façade often disguises the same steel-and-concrete bipolar structure of global politics, reflecting the Soviet mentality that has not been entirely overcome' (ibid.). For instance, Moscow's contemporary view of the 'East–West' dichotomy reflects the rudiments of the Soviet mindset. Such a mindset does not fit into the declared multipolar picture of the world, but it is a very convenient way for Moscow to construct opposing imageries of 'West' and 'non-West'. Nevertheless, some parallels the expert draws do resonate with the mainstream perceptions and beliefs of Russian political elites. The question is posed: 'Why did the 1814–1815 Congress of Vienna result in a stable European order, while the 1919 Treaty of Versailles became meaningless 15 years after it was signed?' (ibid.). In answering this question, Kortunov finds fault with the nature of democratic political leadership. In contrast to the Concert devised by absolute monarchs, Ver-

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sailles was crafted by the leaders of the Western democracies who depended on national public sentiment, which in turn demanded that they 'punish the Germans'. In this reading, Kortunov laments that today's politicians are even more dependent on public sentiment and that 'the chances of seeing new examples of Alexander's magnanimity and Metternich's insight today are slim' (ibid.).

Civilizationalist vocabulary

Multipolarity under Putin has acquired a new *civilizational* dimension. Russian political elites refer approvingly to Samuel Huntington's theory of the 'clash of civilizations'. Just as there are several centres of global power, so there are various civilizational 'poles'. The 2013 Russian Foreign Policy Concept talks of 'global competition […] on a civilizational level,' with 'an increased emphasis on civilizational identity' (ERFUKNI 2013). In proposing a 'dialogue between civilizations,' Moscow is declaring to the West that 'our values are just as good as yours'—different, but in no way inferior. The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept also unambiguously commits to this aspect: 'competition has been … gaining a civilizational dimension' with 'attempts to impose values on others'; 'promoting partnerships across … civilizations' is regarded as a priority; the 'civilizational diversity of the world and the existence of multiple development models have been clearer than ever' (MFARF 2016).

Emphasizing the civilizational dimension of world politics in this way raises the possibility of further cultivating the notion of civilization as a subject of international politics. Multipolar world ideologists consider civilizations as a new subject of international politics (Chebankova 2017). In this reading, 'civilizational development' is seen, as Putin said in a speech to the World Russians People's Council in 2018, as 'the foundation for the multipolar world' while Russia is as 'an authentic civilization, a unique one, but one which does not aggressively claim its exceptionalism' (Kremlin 2018). Referring to a prominent Russian thinker of the 19th century, Nikolai Danilevsky, Putin stated that 'no civilization can call itself supreme, the most developed one' (ibid.). Some Russian intellectuals (Mezhuev 2012; Tretyakov 2012) claim that Danilevsky's ideas could be invoked in defence of the equality of the world's political cultures, their peaceful co-existence and recognition.

Moreover, Russia's elite considers this civilizational ideology to be a distinct intellectual product that it can offer to the world (Tsygankov 2016). The idea is to reconstruct the discourse on international affairs in such a way that

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the ideas of particularity, cultural-historic context and the multiplicity of political forms can be incorporated. Whether such a worldview could contribute to global stability remains an open question. Some argue that the theory of the multipolar world could be developed into a stronger and more coherent political ideology, given its substantial metaphysical and political basis (Chebankova 2017).

The Russian political elites continue to speak of the multipolar world both as a desirable goal and as a modern-day reality. It is one thing for Moscow to embark on a quest to shape the world on the basis of preconceived ideas of multipolarity and another thing to effectively handle the real world constituted by instantaneous and unpredictable processes rather than order or linearity. In a way, the changing global context has been a dream come true moment for Russia. But even when dreams come true, one has to live up to them. The tension between *the normative* – a genuine change to a multipolar world – and *the instinctive* – inherent belief in the Hobbesian nature of world politics – continues to influence Russia's world political attitudes. On the one hand, Moscow speaks of a need to adapt to a world in transition, one that is increasingly globalized and interdependent. On the other, the instinctive element in Moscow's reaction to the pressures of a dynamic world is to draw back to what it knows – classical interpretations of great power politics. Assertive in the pursuit of its goals, the course of Moscow's foreign policy has been condemned in the West. While the Russian elites denounce the 'demonization' of Russia, the general feeling is that they take a certain psychological satisfaction from the fact that Russia is back on the world stage, perhaps 'disliked by some but ignored by none' (Lo 2018). The major legitimating reason for retaining the present course and taking it further is the conviction that it has been widely successful. This is not just the view of the Kremlin and the Russian political elite. It is also shared by some Russian liberal critics, the public and even some experts in the West. 'Russia may be on "the right side of history" in opposing moral interventionism – a position in which it is supported by China and India' (Lo 2018). In Russia, recent foreign policy successes in the Middle East and the partnership with China are stressed in contrast to the failures of Western policymaking.

All this being said though, it is important to note that such preconceived ideas about the inherent and normative nature of world politics do not hang in thin air. Immersed in them, Russia's discourse on the multipolar world is simultaneously flavoured by human personality to an uncommon degree. It is common to speak not just of Putin but also of 'Putin's Russia'. Russia's story

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has become the story of the President himself, a story of which he is a diligent student and that he preaches at every opportunity. This tonality cannot go unmentioned as it intimately pertains to a deeper understanding of the political philosophy within which Putin's worldview is rooted. His perception of Russia's place in the world is certainly not a modest one, neither is his emotional appeal to it: 'As a citizen of Russia and the head of the Russian state I must ask myself: Why would we want a world without Russia?' (Solovyov 2018). He took Yeltsin entirely seriously, in his own way, when the latter, on leaving office because of ill health, told him to 'take care of Russia'. It is no lie that the 'Putin consensus' has gained wide support, implicitly or explicitly, across the broader Russian political spectrum and, perhaps more importantly, that that support is based on the 'gut instinct' of many in Russia, who have come to believe that if there is anyone who should represent modern Russia, it can be no one else but Putin. 'Divorced to marry Russia', that is the kind of admiration he enjoys among many of his compatriots, with some even calling him *vozhd*, meaning a leader of exceptional power and authority. The philosophy behind his foreign policymaking reflects the characteristics of Putin, not only the views and ideas that he cherishes but also the methods he favours of putting them into action. Like Yevgeny Primakov, his political godfather, his political philosophy is not only to defend national interests as such, but also to manage to do so under the most unfavourable conditions, even when the country's capabilities are at a low ebb. As Putin himself observed, speaking at Primakov's funeral, it is important 'to keep listening to Yevgeny Primakov's voice' and 'to remember his lessons' (Kremlin 2019a). Furthermore, Putin's world politics is one which seeks to remain vigilant and alert to developments in larger forces and moods, global and local. Wisdom then consists in finding the balance between the need to 'swim with the currents' or 'appear to be swimming with them', and 'to steer' them in a needed direction, if necessary, to intervene in order to make the difference. 'Blackbelt' in his martial art,[3] practitioners of politics close to Putin do not deny his claim to an equal ranking in matters of foreign policy. It is these qualities, too, namely a conservative and survivalist persona aligned with Russian strategic culture and historical experiences that reaffirm traditional principles of world politics.

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Conclusion

Summing up, Moscow's conception of the global context over the past decade has largely been defined by the idea that the Western-led liberal world order is in decline. This decline is constructed as a result of a historical process that, in Moscow's eyes, has already started. The liberal order is losing its monopoly over 'universal' norms and values, and the centre of gravity in world affairs is shifting to the 'non-West'. Instead, a particularistic approach is proposed that claims to call for a balance of power, multiplicity of politico-cultural forms and multiple centres of international influence. This worldview – of a multipolar world – has been reinforced as Russia's world political doctrine and advanced in the international arena: 'The world should fully reject the concept of Western (i.e. liberal) universalism in favour of developmental pluralism' (Ivanov 2018). Proponents of this view claim that such a conception of world politics can only have a dialogical character. Framed in these terms, the world according to Moscow in significant ways remains rooted in great power politics.

Notes

1 All Foreign Policy Concepts since 2000 derive from global security and geopolitical considerations developed by Yevgeny Primakov. The terminology of multipolarity has shifted lately toward an emphasis on 'polycentrism'. The 2013 Foreign Policy Concept speaks of the transition to a 'polycentric system of international relations.' Practically speaking, there is no substantial difference between the two concepts.

2 Giuseppe Mazzini's idea of a 'United States of Europe'; Gaullist ideas of a broader common European space from the Atlantic to the Pacific; Gorbachev's idea of a 'common European home'; Nicolas Sarkozy's return to the idea of pan-Europa; the Valdai Club's idea of a 'Union of Europe'.

3 In Putin's own analogy, 'Judo teaches self-control, the ability to feel the moment, to see the opponent's strengths and weaknesses, to strive for the best results. I am sure you will agree that these are essential abilities and skills for any politician' (Kremlin 2019b).

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839455296-012 - am 13.02.2026, 05:16:53. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -