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The civilization state in the war against Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

Do considerations of civilization play a role in the Russian aggression against Ukraine? This study starts from the assumption that the conflict in Ukraine cannot be fully explained by the arguments of John Mearsheimer, the main representative of the so-called offensive realist school of international relations theory, who argues that the Russian invasion is driven by fear of NATO's eastward expansion. The author challenges this dominant explanatory framework, arguing that we need to dig deeper to understand Putin's intentions. The paper focuses on the role of the "civilizational state" created by the Putin regime and analyzes the role of its guiding ideology, Eurasianism. The author concludes that the war in Ukraine must be interpreted in the context of the confrontation between the West and Russia, and that this development cannot be understood without taking into account the specific logic and offensive nature of the Russian civilization state.

KEYWORDS

Offensive realism;
ontological security;
civilizational state; state-
civilization discourse;
Eurasianism; culture war

Introduction

"If civilization is what counts, however, violence between Ukrainians and Russians is unlikely. These are two Slavic, primarily Orthodox peoples who have had close relationships for centuries"- wrote Huntington in his famous book on civilizations (Huntington 1999, 167.). From this point of view, one can easily conclude, as, for example, the French political scientist Olivier Roy has done, that the war in Ukraine provides a clear refutation of Huntington's thesis according to which the defining conflicts of the 21st century will erupt between rival civilizations (Roy 2022). The vast majority of Ukraine's population is indeed Orthodox, belonging to the very civilization whose "core state" is Russia, and therefore a clash between them on cultural grounds would have been unthinkable.

So why did President Putin launch the full-scale war? Was it solely for the sake of his country's presumed security interests, as Mearsheimer's offensive realism insists? Was there no role for civilizational factors in this fateful decision? The basic assertion of the following article is that there is more to it than mere strategic considerations: though the latter are evidently not to be discarded; contrary to appearances, the fault line of civilization also plays a key role, albeit not quite in the original sense of the Huntingtonian model. In

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what follows the author makes an attempt to prove that it would be a serious mistake to reduce the explanation of the Russian aggression solely to fears about the expansion of NATO. In order to achieve this aim the study first argues that offensive realism espousing the latter view can only provide an incomplete explanation of the war, and then it analyzes the crucial motives behind Russian policy. The author pays special attention to the importance of the quest for ontological security and to the doctrine of Eurasianism that has come to be espoused by Vladimir Putin. The discourse of the Russian president has played a crucial role in the interpretation of the war, so the argumentation of the article even makes use of his relevant speeches, retrieved from official websites.

Mearsheimer: the answer of offensive realism

According to John Mearsheimer, the most respected exponent of offensive realism, renowned professor at the University of Chicago, everything is explained by Russia's fear of NATO's growing influence. Before elaborating on his position, however, it should be noted that, historically, offensive realism can be traced back to the concept of the so-called structural realism, developed in Kenneth Waltz's famous work *Theory of International Politics* (Waltz 1979). Waltz abandoned the complex approach to international politics that Hans Morgenthau had provided in the first major synthesis of realism, *Politics Among Nations*, and narrowed his analysis to a single dimension, the structure of the international system (Morgenthau 1948). In his opinion, a system cannot be studied in terms of its constituent units; it is only the configuration of power within a system that matters. But Waltz himself admitted that structural realism could not tell a particular state what to do in a specific situation (Waltz 1979, 121). Mearsheimer has adopted this structuralist approach but whereas Waltz was convinced that states saw the balance of power as the best guarantee of their security, his "offensive realism" holds that great powers want to maximize their influence at all costs, even at the cost of upsetting the balance of power (Mearsheimer 2001).

As early as 2014, after Russia's annexation of Crimea Mearsheimer blamed the West claiming in the journal *Foreign Affairs* that NATO's eastward expansion had transformed the geopolitical balance of power in Eastern Europe and thus logically triggered Moscow's action (Mearsheimer 2014). "Putin's reaction should have surprised no one," he says in his 2014 study, adding that "one hears opinions that Ukraine has the right to choose with whom it wishes to ally, but the sad fact is that in great power politics, whoever has the greater power is usually right" (Mearsheimer 2014, 1; 11.) As a consequence, he was strongly opposed to continuing US and EU support for Ukraine which he saw as threatening Russia's legitimate security interests.

Since February 2022 his opinion has not changed, and in June 2022, in his Florence lecture he reiterated *expressis verbis* his old view that the United States was primarily responsible for the Ukraine crisis (Mearsheimer 2022). This position is in keeping with what he expressed much earlier in his major work, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, namely that realists need not make a distinction between "bad" and "good" states, because all great powers operate according to the same logic, regardless of their culture, political system, or who runs the government (Mearsheimer 2001, 17–18)., Adam Tooze, a professor of history at Columbia University argues in a critical essay in the *New Statesman* entitled *John Mearsheimer and the dark roots of offensive realism*, that

Mearsheimer essentially builds on the thesis of the German legal philosopher Carl Schmitt, according to whom the world should be divided into zones of interest for the great powers – in his words, “spatial blocs” (“Großräume”) (Tooze 2022).

But whatever one thinks morally of Mearsheimer’s excuse for the brutal Russian aggression, his belief that “might makes right,” it is clear that offensive realism, which focuses on changes in the structure of the world system, cannot explain how a great power responds to a challenge because it does not take into account the concrete factors behind foreign policy decisions (Kostelka 2022). In his writings and statements Mearsheimer himself refers to such domestic and cultural factors, which are fundamentally alien to the structural realist approach. “Mearsheimer has long, perhaps unwittingly, demonstrated the limits of his offensive realist theory in his public intellectual commentaries” – point out Nicolas R. Smith and Grant Dawson (Smith and Dawson 2022, 181). Let us add that the Trump administration’s Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in a speech at the Hudson Institute in June 2022, called the notion that the Russian president was motivated mainly by fear of NATO “silly” (Pompeo 2022). Although Kyiv’s accession to NATO had in fact been raised in Bucharest in 2008, it was off the agenda for a long time and even the noted Russian geostrategist, professor at Moscow State University, Boris Mezhuev acknowledged in October 2022 that “Washington showed no intention to follow the recommendations by Bolton and the like-minded and welcome Ukraine into NATO in the near future” (Mezhuev 2022). Consequently, other factors must also be taken into account to explain the decision to go to war, especially socio- psychological and cultural considerations.

The Russian civilization state

As the eminent Portuguese thinker and former EU minister in his country, Bruno Maçães rightly observes in his reflections on the perspectives of Eurasia and the “civilizational wall” separating Europe from Asia, the Kremlin decided in the mid-2010s that it no longer wished to belong to the Western world. This turn coincided with the decline in Western power (Maçães 2018, 8). Looking at the same issue from the specific perspective of Russia, Professor Mezhuev expressed a broadly similar idea when he stated that by the middle of the 2010s his country “had used up all possible means of integration with the West,” and so had no choice but to “appeal to civilizational rhetoric as a marker of its special distinction from the Euro-Atlantic community” (Mezhuev 2018). Offensive realism overlooks the role of ideas and individuals, so an examination of the background to the current war cannot ignore the long-held beliefs of Putin and his intellectual entourage that, after breaking radically with the legacy of the Yeltsin-era, a civilizational conflict with the West is inevitable. Add to this the Russian leader’s view of Russia as a so-called “civilizational state,” i.e. an empire that defines itself on the basis of civilization rather than nationality. The concept of the civilizational state was developed in political science already in the 2010s and its essence can be summed up by pointing out that in a civilization state legitimacy does not require democratic functioning; the state’s task is seen as the preservation of civilization (Coker 2019; Egedy 2021; Pabst 2019). In the past, civilizations were not independent actors in world politics, but by the 21st century they have become so. In his basic work on the subject, Christopher Coker, Professor at the LSE, says that in some major non-Western countries (such as China, Russia, Turkey or India)

civilization has become “coterminous with a state” and he rightly emphasizes that in Putin’s Russia the idea of the civilizational state has become very strong (Coker 2019). In his latest Valdai speech, in October 2023, Putin explicitly described his country as “an original civilization-state” adding that “the essential characteristics of a civilization-state encompass diversity and self-sufficiency” (Putin 2023) Western elites took it for granted that by the 21st century the empires had fallen and the nation states had triumphed. They were wrong. The civilizational state rejects the nation-state model because the latter claims to represent only one nation; this is the background to the Russian president’s reference to “diversity.”

Putin’s logic of a civilizational state really does not fit the logic of a nation-state. As early as January 2012, in a journal article Putin expressed his belief that narrow ethnic nationalism was “destructive and primitive” and that his preferred alternative was “state patriotism.” In his words, the Russians play the role of “state-forming people central to the very existence of Russia” whose “great mission is to hold and unite a civilization,” bringing together different peoples and cultures (Cited by Blackburn 2020, 4). So we can see that for Putin the concept of the nation is not rejected but is markedly recharacterized in civilizational terms. “Civilizational nationalism?” In this context, one is tempted to interpret civilizationism as a new formulation of nationalism. However, this would be an oversimplification. The noted researcher, Rogers Brubaker writes that if “the boundaries of belonging and the semantics of self and other are reconceptualised in civilizational terms, then one can speak of an alternative to nationalism” (Brubaker 2017, 42). The official civilizational discourse of the Putin regime includes the concept of the “Russian World” (*russkiy mir*), and it says a lot that the president of the Russian World Federation, founded in 2007, Viacheslav Nikonov pointed out that this concept has a “polyethnic” meaning, in other words it should not be interpreted as “ethnonationalist” in character (Kazharski 2019). Consequently, Brubaker argues, “as an alternative principle of vision,” civilizationism “is not simply reducible to a form of nationalism” (Brubaker 2017, 42.). According to this thinking, if Russia became a nation, it would cease to be a civilization. There can be no doubt that Russian nationalism is implicit in this; “civilizationism combines with nationalism,” in Brubaker’s words, and the most important consequence – in terms of what this article is saying – is that the Russian discourse of civilization perfectly justifies imperial ambitions. The thesis of Russia’s exceptionalism and historical vocation serves as a sharp geopolitical weapon.

The research conducted by Matthew Blackburn in Russia clearly demonstrates – based on a large number of interviews – that, contrary to the views of those who speak of a resurgence of a narrow “ethnic nationalism,” the new dominant trend can be described as a turn to the so-called “state-civilization” discourse. He found that the interview narratives in many respects resonated with the official state discourse. Significantly, Blackburn speaks of a “post- 2012 shift to state-civilization narratives”. (Blackburn 2020, 1–4; Tsygankov 2016) To put it another way, he says that the majority of ordinary people, in line with government propaganda, now imagine Russia “as a unique, harmonious multi-ethnic space in which the Russians (*russkie*) lead without repressing the others.” Furthermore, “Russia’s multinationalism is remembered in myths of peaceful interactions between Russians and indigenous ethnic groups across the imperial and Soviet past.” Blackburn concludes that Russian culture functions as “the glue that holds together a unified category of nationhood.” This civilizational turn initiated by Putin and

documented by, among others, Blackburn has resulted in the “internalization of statist priorities” and “in the reproduction of positive myths of Russia’s multi-ethnic past” (Blackburn 2020, 2). The “state-civilization” discourse has become even more pronounced since the outbreak of the war.

Ontological security and preserving civilizational distinctiveness

Self-definition as a civilizational state is closely linked to the need for “ontological security.” This is an important aspect to examine if we want to understand the motives behind the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This notion, which is also not a part of the arguments of offensive realism, was originally developed by the Scottish psychologist Robert D. Laing in his seminal book *The Divided Self* to describe those for whom their identity and autonomy are always in question (Laing 1960; Penguin, Harmondsworth 2010). Smith and Dawson remind us that it was Jennifer Mitzen and Brent Steele who introduced this concept into the research of international relations. Mitzen has argued that although states are not persons, “losing a sense of state distinctiveness would threaten the ontological security of its members” (Smith and Dawson 2022, 185).

Steele distinguishes between the traditional concept of security, based on the need to survive and security as the opposite of insecurity, a situation in which “individuals are uncomfortable with who they are.” Such critical situations “represent identity threats.” He sums up his conclusion in the following words: “Ontological security, as opposed to security as survival, is security as being.” (Steele 2008, 51) According to Aliaksei Kazharski “ontological security could be defined as depending on preservation of the integrity of the self *despite* ruptures in established routines” (Kazharski 2019). In these interpretations, ontological security even precedes the importance of material security. Kazharski even suggests that Putin’s discourse, providing a particular framing to recent Russian history, aims at creating a “securitized identity” (Kazharski 2019). It is worth noting that the Russian civilization state, in contrast to the Chinese version dedicated to modernization, has subordinated economic development to political objectives, primarily to security requirements.

Why is this crucially important to understand Russia’s behaviour leading to the aggression? The answer is clear: the primary orientation of the Russian civilizational discourse is the creation of ontological security, an objective inseparably linked to the current war. Kazharski argues, that discourses on Russian civilization “are an instrument of the Russian establishment by which a holistic identity is articulated” across the ideological and social cleavages encompassing the disintegration of the USSR (Kazharski 2019). Writing about the civilizational state, Coker quotes a high-ranking politician in Moscow as saying: “Russians have always been ready to suffer for a good cause.” This was meant to say that the Russian people are ready to make great sacrifices “to have a role in the world of which they can be proud” (Coker 2019). In other words they deserve great power status. Götz and Staun rightly emphasize that “the country that occupies the most central place in Russian conceptions of geopolitics and status is Ukraine” (Götz and Staun 2022). All the more so because an independent Ukraine also threatens Russian identity as Kyiv (in Russian, Kiev), often referred to as “the mother of Russian cities,” was the birthplace of the first Russian state. With some exaggeration, one could say that it is even a danger to

the very idea of Russia itself. In the eyes of the Kremlin, therefore, the possession of Ukraine is essential for Russia's ontological security, and its loss poses an existential threat.

Imperial and national versions of identity

It is clear that in February 2022, Russia, embodying an imperial identity declared war on Ukraine upholding a national identity. (This identity not only became more salient for the Ukrainians because of the war but also acquired a more radical meaning as the Ukrainian scholar Volodymyr Kulyk has pointed out.) (Kulyk 2023) While the Ukrainians are fighting to survive as a nation, the Russians are convinced that their empire simply cannot exist without Ukraine, and therefore refuse to accept Ukrainian national identity (Maçães 2023). Consequently, in the eyes of the Russian leaders Ukraine must be an integral part of the civilizational state controlled by Moscow. Putin blames the Poles, and even the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, for the idea of Ukraine's independence, and concludes that "modern Ukraine is entirely a product of the Soviet era." Yuriy Savelyev, professor of sociology at Taras Shevchenko University in Kyiv stresses that, according to Moscow's propaganda, "Ukraine has been formed as 'anti-Russia' by Western governments" and "Ukrainians do not exist as a separate nation" (Savelyev 2023). The latter idea is summarized in Putin's infamous essay "*On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians*," with the conclusion "We are one people" (Putin 2021). The two identities are irreconcilable: the imperial is fundamentally different from the national because it is not tied to a single ethnicity, culture or religion. Although it often goes unnoticed, Putin, as Maçães points out, "does not think along national lines," but in terms of large world political blocs. So the issue goes beyond Putin's requirement for exclusivity in Ukraine or Russia's "near abroad:" he thinks in terms of world order. And, as a result, he wants a world order that is somehow in line with Russia's civilizational heritage, that somehow reflects it – otherwise, the opposite will happen, Russia will be forced to mirror the West (Maçães 2018, 39–40.). The pre-war world order will not be restored after the conflict. Eszter Bartha rightly points out that in the international arena there is "a fierce struggle. . . for a new world order and Putin's Russia is one competitor" (Bartha 2022). One has the impression that although Putin denies it in words, he in fact wishes to return to the world of 1945 when the victorious great powers carved out separate spheres of interest, zones of "privileged civilizational interest." As Coker rightly notes, in the case of Russia, the threat to international order does not come from a competing ideology, i.e. communism, but "from a civilizational state that claims its own rights and privileges" (Coker 2019).

"Eurasianism" as a geopolitical project

For Putin, the concept to counter the West is "Eurasianism," an idea with foundations laid in the first third of the 20th century by Prince Nikolai Trubetzkoy. Assuming that Russia had a mission for the Eurasian continent, the renowned thinker described the Russian state as the heir to the Eurasian tradition in his major work *The Legacy of Genghis Khan* (Trubetzkoy and Liberman 1991). The Hungarian scholar István Szilágyi rightly remarks, that "the representatives of the Eurasian tradition have made a scientific turn," because "they introduced the basic geopolitical categories into Russian social-scientific thinking." According to this intellectual tradition Russia is neither part of Europe nor part of Asia, but

a completely separate, special entity. Peter Savitsky, another well-known “Eurasianist,” emphasized that Russia is a special civilizational formation, being the “middle ground,” a world in its own right (Szilágyi 2019, 14; 18–19.)

These ideas are echoed by the most influential contemporary theoretician of Russian imperial thought, Alexandr Dugin, who is generally considered to be the main intellectual source of Putin. He is the author of *The Foundations of Geopolitics* (1997), a book with a dubious reputation, often mentioned as “Russia’s Manifest Destiny.” The work suggests that even the Cold War was, in fact, nothing else than an intense rivalry between Eurasia and the “Atlanticist” empire. In one of his later works, translated into English as *Eurasian Mission: an Introduction to Neo-Eurasianism* Dugin expresses the opinion that in the struggle against Western civilization the only successful strategy for survival is the cooperation of Asian peoples with Russian leadership (Dugin and Morgan 2014). In Dugin’s approach, Russians and other Asian peoples should overcome past animosities by relying on an “internationalism” that shares a common traditionalism and authoritarianism. According to him the Eurasian empire, based on a “third way” between capitalism and socialism, should control as much of the territory of Asia as possible. For this type of thinking the opposition between the self and the other is constructed as the dichotomy of Eurasianism versus the West.

The idea of an Eurasian empire rising above the politically fragmented West has also increasingly captured Putin’s imagination. After 2012 Putin gradually broke with cooperating with the West and wished to change Russia into a dominant Eurasian power. His political aspirations were given a strong ideological legitimacy by the gradual expansion of the anti-modern and anti-liberal, in some respects almost esoteric, “Eurasian discourse,” which stressed the cultural distinctiveness of Russia. Civilizational thinking has always rebelled against universalist ideas and this point has been particularly emphasized in contemporary Russian thought. Continuing the tradition of Russian conservative thinking that began with the towering figure of Nikolai Danilevsky in the nineteenth century, today’s Eurasianists are convinced that Russia must preserve its political and cultural distinctiveness, maintaining the “myth of Russia’s alternativism,” i.e. the belief that Russia is destined to become a political alternative to the West (Chebankova 2015). The Canadian political scientist Ray Silvius calls attention to the “embedded civilizationalism” of the official political discourse, which in his interpretation implies the “co-optation” of potentially radical elements of Eurasian thought by the state, thus ensuring their control (Silvius 2015, 75–76.). Back in 2012, at the beginning of his third presidential term, Putin declared that Russia should become the “centre of gravity and leader” of Eurasia (Putin 2012). In 2014, he founded the Eurasian Economic Union by reorganizing the Eurasian Customs Union, together with Kazakhstan and Belarus, but failed to include Ukraine. It is worth noting that the roots of Putin’s program, in Blank’s words, “are not in economics but in geopolitics,” his intention has been “fundamentally geopolitical in its thrust” (Blank 2014, 20).

Echoing Dugin, Putin emphasizes that “globalists” have leveraged Ukraine as a critical front in their campaign against Russia. According to him their real aim is to undermine and destroy the traditional Russian values. In this approach, a gigantic battle is supposed to take place between Western and Russian civilization, in which there can be no compromise; the winner takes all. (“Zero-sum survivalism,” in the terminology of international relations theory.) In his 2013 speech, Putin had already fully embedded the

confrontation between Russia and the West in civilizational terms, accusing the West of trying to impose its own civilization on everyone by standing up for a “standardised form of the unipolar world.” The West, he declared, seeks world hegemony and will not tolerate sovereign states, only vassals (Putin 2013). Vladimir Pastukhov, a Russian political scientist at the University College London rightly notes that in his policies Putin has revived the traditional Russian messianism (Goble 2014). In this spirit Putin has also rejected classic ethnic nationalism and Western-type multiculturalism suggesting instead the promotion of “state civilization.”

Ukraine has emerged as a key battleground in this dramatic struggle, not just as a unique geopolitical frontier between Europe and Asia, but also as a “cleft country” with divergent cultures in its Western and Eastern parts, posing a significant source for conflict, as Huntington warned (Huntington 1999, 165). It is worth remembering that before the Russian annexation of Crimea, Ukrainian foreign policy was trying to strike a balance between Moscow and Brussels. The “cleft country” then chose the West, wishing to align more closely with European institutions (Ekman 2023). Ukraine’s identity division noted by Huntington has been documented to have decreased as the pro-Russian orientation has been on the wane (Akaliyski and Reeskens 2023). Offensive realism fails to take into account the fact that, in Dugin’s and Putin’s reading, the military threat posed by the West is in fact less significant than the threat represented – in Smith’s and Dawson’s words – by the extension of the West’s “social identity,” i.e. its social and cultural values to Ukraine. So there is more than a security threat – it is a “deeper ontological threat” (Smith and Dawson 2022, 185). As a consequence, this development would have a deleterious effect on Russia’s imperial identity. It follows from the logic of Putin’s civilizational state that the possession of Ukraine is not a “bargaining” matter; it is a “non-negotiable” issue. Western civilization is thus seen by the Kremlin as a threat to the very existence of imperial Russia, a threat it is prepared to take huge risks to avert.

Global culture war?

A key factor in the profound aversion to Western civilization – sometimes admitted, more often hidden – is the total rejection of its core value, democracy. In this view democracy is considered to be an almost terrifying threat to their system. Eurasianists see it as a great asset that, as a legacy of the Mongol rule, the Russian political establishment is not based on the Western principle of power-sharing but rather on a tradition of unlimited despotism. The world-famous geostrategist Zbigniew Brzezinski argues that Russia cannot be both an empire and a democracy, because the two are mutually exclusive (Brzezinski 1994). It is fair to say that Russia has never in its history wanted to give up the first option, and President Putin is not considering the second option either, which is why he does not wish to tolerate a (potentially) democratizing Ukraine. From this perspective even a militarily neutral Ukraine would not be compatible with an imperial-minded Russia in the longer term (Kowalsky 2022). It shows a lot that the Ukrainian-Russian conflict erupted in 2014, just after Kyiv planned to conclude an association treaty with the European Union which is based on democracy. Anne Applebaum, the well-known historian and journalist wrote in an essay in *The Atlantic* on the eve of the Russian invasion in early February 2022 that Putin wanted the Ukrainian democracy to fail. He wanted his neighbours to doubt whether democracy would ever be a viable system (Applebaum 2022). A Western-style

political system in Ukraine threatened to undermine Putin's autocratic regime. (It should be noted that the same factor also plays a major role in China's irritation with democratic Taiwan in its neighbourhood.)

In September 2022, Putin again made it clear that he was thinking in terms of a global civilizational struggle, using even more radical rhetoric than before. In a speech celebrating the annexation of four regions from Ukraine, he insisted that the world had entered an era of "fundamental revolutionary change, with new centres of power emerging." He constructed two competing and mutually exclusive civilizations and attacked the West by posing an absurd question: "What else, if not racism, is the West's supreme conviction that its own civilization, its neoliberal culture, provides an unquestionable model for the whole world?" After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin continued, the West saw itself as dictating to the whole world, seeking a "hegemony based on despotism and apartheid," but despite all its efforts, Russia did not give up. In fact, the "collective West" (Putin's preferred term) is afraid of Russian culture, he claimed; "they see our thinking and philosophy as a direct threat," and want to ban it. For him, Russia's vocation is to save humanity from what he sees as a decadent and nihilistic Western civilization, whose religion is now "pure Satanism." In Ukraine too, quoting his words, the West is waging a "hybrid war" just to make Russia its colony (Putin 2022). In this way, his annexation speech framed the invasion of Ukraine as a life-and-death struggle to avoid being "erased from history."

Ivan Timofeyev, the programme director of the Valdai Discussion Club, made it clear in his April 2023 paper that the choice between the West and the East is no longer an option for his country, because only the latter offers prospects. The intention behind the sanctions is to punish Russia for having rebelled" against the Western world order (Timofeev 2023). Dmitry Medvedev, the former president of Russia went even further in July 2023 when he declared that what was happening in Ukraine was not just a regional conflict but "a total confrontation between the collective West and the rest of the world" (Medvedev 2023). In his reading, this conflict must be explained by the contradiction between the basic goals of human development. In October 2023 at the Valdai Discussion Club, Putin expressed his view that "the world is on its way to a synergy of civilization-states... Nobody should betray their civilization; this is the path towards universal chaos" (Putin 2023). It is hard to avoid the conclusion that we are witnessing a clash of civilizations in a new sense. This clash, transcending Ukraine, has made it – against its will – the epicentre of a struggle between incompatible value systems.

The war in Ukraine and the Eurasian challenge

Thus, the view that Putin deems the total destruction of Ukraine a small price to pay to prevent its Western integration seems accurate. The fact that the Kremlin is not even sparing the Russian-speaking population of eastern Ukraine and does not hesitate to bomb their towns to rubble to achieve this goal seems to confirm this assumption. In this respect, Huntington's prediction turned out to be wrong, because in the exceptional circumstances, their civilizational identity was replaced by national identity. In another respect, however, Huntington's thesis undoubtedly seems to be supported by the fact that the unity of the Western world has shown a specific civilizational pattern, since it was not only NATO members that took action against Russia, while one member of NATO,

Turkey, for example, was not prepared to condemn Moscow. The conflict in Ukraine has drawn a sharp fault line between the West, which has overcome its previous fragmentation with surprising speed, and non-Western civilizations which are reluctant to turn against Russia. So Ross Douthat is right in pointing out in the *New York Times* that recent developments in international politics – the increasingly autocratic nature of the establishment in China and Russia, the shift away from secular states in Turkey and India – cannot be described simply in terms of the opposition between democracies and autocracies, but rather in terms of explicitly civilizational aspects. These are not just “indistinguishable forms of ‘autocracy, but culturally distinctive developments” – concludes the political analyst (Douthat 2022).

A peculiar consequence of the war has been the spectacular *rapprochement* between Moscow and Beijing; the rallying of Western democracies has certainly contributed to the rise of the coalition of Eurasian autocracies. There is no doubt that civilization states are the enemies of the West, rejecting Western universalism and democratic freedoms “in favour of their own cultural exceptionalism”. (Pabst, 2019) This statement is particularly true for present-day China. Much has been written about the replacement of the “Atlantic Era” by the “Eurasian Era” and no one can deny the structural changes taking place in the world order but the present author believes that even so, great caution is needed in assessing the prospects of the “Russia-China axis.” Although twenty days before the invasion in February, the friendship between Russia and China was solemnly declared to be a “no limits partnership,” it was based on anti-Westernism, and not on a shared civilizational community. Eurasianism is understood very differently in Beijing and Moscow. As Andrew Michta aptly noted, Putin was seeking “a civilizational win as a validation of Russia’s Eurasian course” (Michta 2023). However, Putin’s plans for Ukraine have failed and Russia is already heavily dependent on China, which is an order of magnitude stronger. Consequently, the long-term viability of their alliance is questionable, as Russia would have to accept such a high degree of subordination that is hardly in keeping with its ambitions. Beijing has no interest in the sudden collapse of Putin’s regime, but it sees the whole of Asia as its sphere of interest, and although it talks about the need for a multipolar world, it is actually thinking (with America) of a bipolar world order. It cannot be ruled out that in the long run the Russian leadership will still have to follow Peter the Great in turning to the West, which may be facilitated by the fact that Russian civilization has Christian roots and has long been part of Europe. But a reorientation towards the West is certainly not an option in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

In 2019, the sharp-eyed French President, Emmanuel Macron, astutely observed that Russia – together with China and India “...consider themselves, as some have noted, genuine civilization states...which have not just disrupted our international order, assumed a key role in the economic order, but have also very forcefully reshaped the political order and the political thinking that goes with it” (Ambassadors’ Conference 2019). “They have a genuine philosophy” – he added. This article tries to prove that Russia has indeed become a so-called civilizational state, with all of its characteristic features, and it has also found a “genuine philosophy” to support its imperial claims. Although throughout its modern history Russia has been, in Huntington’s terminology, a “torn country,” i.e.

one that has always struggled to define its own identity, under Putin it has embraced Eurasianism, a political philosophy full of mystical and irrational elements. (Huntington, 1998, 139).

How might we describe, in Silvius's apt phrase, the "embedded civilizationism" of the Putin regime? Theoretically, it seems possible to distinguish between "defensive" and "offensive" civilizationism, depending on whether the aim of a civilizational state is merely to defend its heritage or, more than that, to act offensively in the international arena with reference to its values (Galeotti 2023). Given Moscow's new assertiveness, it's clear that Putin's Russia embodies the latter, more aggressive form of civilizationism. If its embedded civilizationism were of a defensive nature, it would not attempt to subvert the West, and it would not seek to subjugate and destroy Ukraine, yet it would certainly still resist assimilation into the "collective West." "Defensive" civilizationism would entail a more cautious, less militant foreign policy, characterized by an isolationist attitude towards the West. "We must develop a feeling of indifference to the West" – wrote in this spirit in October 2022, Mezhuev, who considers himself an anti-interventionist "paleoconservative," adding that "Russia needs to give up all efforts to become part of the Euro-Atlantic community and should start viewing it as an 'alien' civilizational space" (Mezhuev 2022).

However, Russia is now acting much more offensively and looks upon itself as the leader of the anti-Western bloc, starting from the assumption that the new world order cannot be based on separate civilizations without destroying the supremacy of Western civilization (Galeotti 2023). This attitude cannot be described as "defensive," on the contrary, it can rightly be called the "offensive" variant of civilizationism. In the Kremlin's perception, Western support for Ukraine is "equated with unipolarity," while a Russian triumph in Ukraine would also mean a victory over the West and the realization of multipolarity (Galeotti 2023). The civilizational discourse of the Russian state described above serves not only the bid for the "Russian world," but also a "geo-cultural offensive" against the West. The war in all respects helps the Putin regime in this endeavour. It is the contention of this article that Putin's aggression against Ukraine can be clearly derived from the operational dynamics of the Russian civilizational state. Focusing on the civilizational state and its ideology of legitimacy provides a stronger interpretive framework than Mersheimer's offensive realism for understanding the real background to the Russian invasion.

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