

“Why Russia is Europe and the EU... not so much”: The Re-Imagining of Russia’s Place in Europe

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Introduction

Right-wing nationalists have made a resurgence across Europe. This is true in the original ‘Inner Six’ EU states, where the populist Five Star movement and the far-right League formed a governing coalition in 2018 and the AfD has risen to be the first far-right party to enter the German Bundestag in decades. It is also true in the newer Eastern EU member states, where the Law and Justice party of Poland and Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party in Hungary have exploited anti-immigrant and antisemitic stereotypes to scapegoat and distract from their governments’ dismantling of democratic institutions. The liberal consensus which has driven the European project and reshaped the definition of Europeanness in recent decades is increasingly questioned by Eurosceptic voices on the populist and nationalist right.

In popular media as well as in academia, the discussion of Russia’s relationship to the rise of the European nationalist right is chiefly conceived in terms of collaboration and collusion between Russian state-aligned actors and Western right-wing radicals. Indeed, the Russian government has invited and collaborated with right-wing populist actors in Western Europe, and much research has been done on the ways in which Russian state-affiliated media promote illiberal populist narratives, especially on the nationalist right. In more general terms, Russia works to legitimize and liaise with populists on all parts of the political spectrum including even the most marginal far right,² and in return targets the demographics that identify with these right-wing populists to project ‘conservative soft power’, using a narrative of returning to traditional and Christian values.

Though the discussion of Russian and right-wing nationalist collaboration has often been through the lens of pragmatic collusion, the mutual appeal between Russian conservatism and European right-wing nationalism should not be understated. Right-wing nationalists’ interpretation of a Europe united by common tradition but not common rules shares much with the Russian conservative nationalist idea, which values national sovereignty and cultural distinctiveness as its core values. As Keating and Kaczmarek rightly point out, it is a liberal-democratic bias to assume that the illiberal

¹ Translations of Russian-language newspaper articles have been provided by the author. Transliterations are provided using the BGN/PCGN Romanization standard.

² Laruelle’s edited volume on links between Russia and the European far right are enlightening on Russia’s methods of legitimizing the far right in particular. Marlene Laruelle, ed., *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

conservative conception of the nation-state which Russia projects is ineffective in soft power terms.³ They argue that Russian conservative soft power attracts European nationalists toward Russia, but I contend here that the reverse is also true: European right-wing nationalism also attracts Russia toward Europe. This Dahrendorf essay therefore seeks to examine how far has the realignment of Europe by right-populists and conservatives toward Russia resulted in a shift in the Russian perception of Europe, and of its own place within this Europe. Based on a reading of opinion articles published in Russian newspapers, I explore the ways in which Russian intellectual discourses around European identity are shaped by the EU's 'crisis of identity'.⁴

As a Westerner examining Russian perceptions of identity and Europeanness (despite my family ties to the former USSR), I should preface this essay by acknowledging that my perspective is that of an outsider looking in. It is important to recognize how Western scholarship generalizes about Russia in problematic ways; though, as I will discuss below, Russia cannot be neatly defined as 'western' or 'eastern', Western and particularly Anglo-American scholarship on Russia is beset by many of the same tropes of orientalism as scholarship of other global regions: dismissing and patronizing Russian self-representations while privileging the dominant paradigm of viewing Russia as an unknowable yet overly clichéd 'other' which only the Western expert may decipher.⁵

This essay therefore takes care to distinguish between, firstly, the perceptions which (western) Europeans have of Russia in relation to Europe, secondly the perceptions which Russians have of the West and Europe, and thirdly the perceptions which Russians have of themselves as part of Europe. Having distinguished these, I will then turn to the analysis of post-Crimean and post-European refugee crisis Russian intellectual discourse on Russian Europeanness, and finally conclude on the extent to which the rise of the European populist right has brought about a changed relation to Europe for Russian conservatives.

Peering through a window on the West: the Russian 'other' and the European 'self'
Looking at a map, a conventional representation of Europe has its ending at the Ural River, the Caucasus Mountains, and the Turkish Straits, making neat lines down the middle of Russia, Turkey, and several countries in the South Caucasus. Yet the borders of Europe as imagined by Europeans themselves are much fuzzier; in addition to being a geopolitical and cultural construct, Europe is an

³ Vincent Charles Keating and Katarzyna Kaczmarek, "Conservative Soft Power: Liberal Soft Power Bias and the 'Hidden' Attraction of Russia," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 22, no. 1 (March 2019): 1–27.

⁴ Articles were selected using the Integrum database of Russian news media.

⁵ For further reading on the orientalizing of Russia, especially in the realm of foreign policy, see James D.J. Brown, "A Stereotype, Wrapped in a Cliché, inside a Caricature: Russian Foreign Policy and Orientalism," *Politics* 30, no. 3 (2010): 149–59.

identity. Being European does not merely situate one on a map, but also on a spectrum of values, cultural norms, and self-representations. In this sense, European identity bears many similarities to a national identity, being an imagined community understood to be a distinct, delineated entity.⁶ As such, Europeanness is embedded in a continuous process of discursive construction and contestation, as well as political institutionalization within the structures of the European Union and other regional organizations.⁷ As a constructed identity, Europeanness is defined by its relationship to an 'other', and these ongoing processes of demarcating Europe and not-Europe are indeed central to the formation of a European identity.⁸

Broadly, scholars identify a dichotomy between two ways of defining European identity: in exclusionary, adversarial and geopolitical terms, or in inclusionary, value-based terms.⁹ In both manners of categorizing European identity, Russia is treated as a liminal other, neither entirely European nor entirely excluded from it. As Kuus remarks, Europe's internal otherization operates in a gradation between Europe and not-Europe, gradually becoming less and less 'purely' European as one moves from west to east.¹⁰ Put otherwise, in the Eurocentric contemporary global order, the concepts of 'European civilization' is understood to have a core, to which all others, including Russia, are understood only in comparison.¹¹

Russia's claim to Europe and Europeanness is contested within the country just as much as without; in fact, Greenfeld contends that the debate around Russia's belonging in Europe is foundational in Russian national identity; Russia's self-image is thus almost conceived as a "negative reflection" of Europe's own, formulated in Eurocentric terms but consciously attempting to distinguish itself from Europe.¹² As Russian identity formed according to the "template" of European national Romanticism during the early modern era, the perception arose within Russia that Russia was not simply different,

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2016 edition (London: Verso Books, 1983).

⁷ Richard K. Herrmann and Marilyn B. Brewer, "Identities and Institutions: Becoming European in the EU," in *Transnational Identities: Becoming European in the EU*, by Richard K. Herrmann, Thomas Risse, and Marilyn B. Brewer (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 1–23.

⁸ Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: "The East" in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 4.

⁹ For instance, Diez refers to the first as temporal and the second as geographical, whereas Delanty distinguishes between several forms of universalism and particularism. Thomas Diez, "Europe's Others and the Return of Geopolitics," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (July 2004): 319–35; Gerard Delanty, "Models of European Identity: Reconciling Universalism and Particularism," *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 3, no. 3 (2002): 345–59.

¹⁰ Merje Kuus, "Europe's Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe," *Progress in Human Geography* 28, no. 4 (August 2004): 479.

¹¹ Viatcheslav Morozov and Bahar Rumelili, "The External Constitution of European Identity: Russia and Turkey as Europe-Makers," *Cooperation and Conflict* 47, no. 1 (March 2012): 35.

¹² Howard F. Stein, "Russian Nationalism and the Divided Soul of the Westernizers and Slavophiles," *Ethos* 4, no. 4 (1976): 407; Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

but backwards in relation to Europe.¹³ Jumpstarted by Peter the Great with the formation of the Russian Empire and the foundation of Saint Petersburg, Russia's "window on the West", Russia's modernization can be traced to a 'Westernizing' attitude, seeking to 'catch up' on this perceived backwardness in order to gain a seat at the table of great European powers.¹⁴ Subsequently, an opposing idea arose against Westernism in the form of Slavophilism, which rejected the idea that Russia needed to join the European 'club', and should instead forge a unique civilisational destiny. Nonetheless, one just as much as the other represented ways of defining Russianness in relation to Europeanness, and both were the product of existential envy of Europe; even while Slavophilism attempted to invert the dichotomy by which Europe represented civilization and Russia barbarism, it still used the same benchmarks to evaluate cultural advancement as did the West – only inverting, rather than subverting, these norms. Indeed, Slavophilism emphasized Russia's status as a "Third Rome" with a unique messianic role, yet in calling Moscow Rome it defined itself in relation to Europe.¹⁵ Subsequently, Malinova argues these competing understandings of Russian identity are not distinct ideologies, but rather a single "repertoire of meanings", which Russians attempt to represent and construct using different strategies, which may find varying success at varying points in time.¹⁶

In more recent history, the debate on Russia's place in Europe has been relevant despite changing in character, particularly as the last vestiges of the Russian Empire fell away with the end of the Soviet Union. In the global order governed by the Western hegemonic powers, Russia is sensitive to the perception that with the end of the Soviet era, it lost its place on the world stage, and is now materially and technologically dependent on the Western "global capitalist core".¹⁷ As Tsygankov notes, contemporary Eurasianists recognise "universal-values" Europe as an other and a threat, believing that international relations are a confrontational struggle between civilizations and their unique identities; European universalist liberal values are therefore conceived as a threat to Russia's identity and distinctiveness.¹⁸ Russia's renewed feeling of separateness and inferiority is compounded by the institutionalization of belonging in Europe through the European Union, and in the West through NATO, both institutions of which Russia is not a member. Though its ineligibility for these institutions is the result of Russia's authoritarian character, Russians believe that these institutions

¹³ Olga Malinova, "Obsession with Status and Ressentiment: Historical Backgrounds of the Russian Discursive Identity Construction," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47, no. 3–4 (December 1, 2014): 294.

¹⁴ Neumann, *Uses of the Other*, 76.

¹⁵ Peter J. S. Duncan, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Revolution, Communism and After* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 18–28.

¹⁶ Malinova, "Obsession with Status and Ressentiment," 293.

¹⁷ Viatcheslav Morozov, "Aimed for the Better, Ended up with the Worst: Russia and International Order," *Journal on Baltic Security* 1, no. 1 (2015): 28.

¹⁸ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Self and Other in International Relations Theory: Learning from Russian Civilizational Debates," *International Studies Review* 10, no. 4 (December 2008): 771.

have an inherent stigma against Russia which goes beyond their formal prerequisites for membership; as the borders of these institutions stretched further and further east in the 2000s, coming to include countries that had once belonged in the same group of former Warsaw Pact states as Russia, the exclusion of Russia from the Western 'clique' became more noticeable. As these institutions came to transform the meaning of what it means to be European, Russia's exclusion was interpreted as a purposeful attempt to ostracize it.

Against this backdrop, international events involving Europe and Russia in the past several years have exacerbated these sentiments. The Crimean annexation has further alienated Russia from Europe both in symbolic and material terms, while the refugee crisis, the Euro-crisis, Brexit, and the rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe have together resulted in a considerably less favourable image of the European Union. During this same time, attempts have been made to institutionalize Russia's special path apart from Europe in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union, and official discourse from the Putin administration has increasingly relied on conservative and nationalist rhetoric to construct a dichotomy between a morally decadent Europe and a socially conservative Russia, moralizing and playing up the perceived threats of feminism and LGBT ideology against Russian Orthodoxy and social conservative values.¹⁹

This 'conservative turn' is nonetheless not only imposed from above. As Morozov notes, conservative nationalism, particularly in its anti-Western and anti-liberal forms, has long enjoyed support among both 'average' Russians and intellectuals.²⁰ Considering this, the way that political events in Europe over the last several years have echoed in the realm of intellectual discourse is not closely studied in the literature. In the next section, I shall examine the reaction among Russian media elites to the so-called 'European crisis' or 'decline of Europe', looking at opinion articles on the topic of Europe and Europeanness in Russian print media. Opinion articles were selected through Integrum among Moscow-based and regional newspapers, magazines and online media between April 2014 and January 2020 using several variations on the search term 'Russian European identity'.

Babylon versus Byzantium: Europe and Russia in Russian conservative intellectual discourse narratives

Discourse analysis views discourse as a social practice that is "socially constitutive as well as socially shaped" in constructing and representing identities, such that it is influenced by society but

¹⁹ See Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, "The Pussy Riot Affair and Putin's Démarche from Sovereign Democracy to Sovereign Morality," *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 4 (2014): 615–21.

²⁰ Morozov, "Aimed for the Better, Ended up with the Worst," 30.

contributes to maintaining the status quo as well as changing it.²¹ Within discourse analysis, narratives are a specific form of discourse that is closely studied in the analysis of identity discourse, because “it is by way of narrative that people are said to be able to construct a continuous self—one that fuses past and future orientation together into one’s present identity”.²² Here I will be basing my exploration of Russian discourse of Europe on that offered by Hülse as an approach to studying othering and identity claims in discourse through narratives.²³

In investigating Russian media discourses of Europe, I seek to understand how the discussion and perception of Europe reflects back on Russian elites’ perception of Russia’s belonging in Europe. Discourse analysis requires consideration of the context within which texts are produced; here, the context is the European Union’s crisis period, including Brexit, the refugee crisis, the Crimean annexation, and the rise of the populist right, as well as the broader context of Russian identity formation in relation to Europe as outlined above. I pay particular attention to discourses on the European populist right as a key discursive element that is relevant to the construction of national and European identity. Thus, modelling my research questions off Hülse, my hypothesis is that the discourse on Europe’s period of crises is simultaneously a discourse on Russia’s belonging in Europe.²⁴ In contrast to Hülse’s work on Turkey, I examine not the questioning of Russia’s belonging to Europe by the ‘European core’, but rather by Russians themselves; I seek to explore the following²⁵:

1. How is Europe’s internal crisis represented/constructed?
2. How is Russia as a nation-state represented/constructed in comparison to Europe?
3. How is the identity of Russia in relation to Europe represented/constructed?

The “crisis of the West” and the fall of Rome

Preceding Europe like a bud does a bouquet, Greece is so old that it remembers the past as it was before the great rift that divided West and East.

²¹ Ruth Wodak and Norman Fairclough, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” in *Discourse as Social Interaction*, by Teun Adrianus van Dijk, Discourse Studies: A Disciplinary Introduction 2 (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 258.

²² Michael Bamberg, Anna De Fina, and Deborah Schiffrin, “Discourse and Identity Construction,” in *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, by Seth J. Schwartz, Koen Luyckx, and Vivian L. Vignoles (New York: Springer, 2011), 180.

²³ Hülse uses this framework to analyse how official discourses on Turkey’s EU accession concurrently act to reinforce the perception that Turkey’s European identity is contested and not-quite European. Rainer Hülse, “The Discursive Construction of Identity and Difference: Turkey as Europe’s Other?,” in *ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops* (Mannheim, 1999), 1–23; Rainer Hülse, “Looking Beneath the Surface: Invisible Othering in the German Discourse about Turkey’s Possible EU Accession,” in *Ionian Conference* (Corfu, 2000), 1–24, <http://aei.pitt.edu/644/1/ICHuelsse.pdf>.

²⁴ Hülse, “The Discursive Construction of Identity and Difference,” 17.

²⁵ Given the space constraints of this essay, this exploratory analysis is not exhaustive.

“Since then,” I said to my clever comrade, “we have not tired of looking for this border line.”

“And in vain,” he replied, “Europe is a part of the world bounded at the west by the Atlantic Ocean, and at the east by law. [...] where exactly the border falls, you’d sooner find out from reading newspapers than by looking at a map”.²⁶

The concept of Europe is a complicated one for Russians. Of the texts compiled here, two types can be delineated: the historical-philosophical, treating Russia and Europe as concepts to explore and reflect on through history, and the geopolitical, treating these two concepts as fixed, homogenous and anthropomorphous entities. In the latter, ‘Europe’ is short for the European Union in Russian media commentary, much like ‘America’ is short for the United States. Using the term of Europe in this way by default (if the broader European civilization rather than the EU is meant, this is generally specified) shows how conflated the ideas of Europeanness and the EU’s own values and norms are even in intellectual discourses in the media. To Russians, this Europe seems foreign and distant, because as opposed to Russia, Europe is almost utopic:

A few years ago, the European Union was perceived as a kind of “Garden of Eden”, where benefits are distributed fairly, human rights are well protected, and countries both large and small are given equal rights and funds. [...] There’s no point in lying! Despite all its talk about a special path of development out of some sort of shame of its hidden desires, in fact, Russia too would like to be a part of Europe.²⁷

In describing the EU, a feeling of envy is noticeable, and Russian writers are self-aware in this regard. However, ‘a few years ago’ indicates that a shift has occurred in recent years; indeed, the compiled texts contrast the Europe of ‘before’, consisting of symbols of prosperity and tolerance, with the Europe of ‘after’, ridden with crises and failed ideas. For instance, the above text appearing in *Argumenty i Fakty* goes on to argue that the EU has gone from being seen as the Garden of Eden to being a Babylonian civilization on the verge of collapse. In an interview for *Argumenty i Fakty*, one historian, Nataliya Narochitskaya, echoes this idea: “What happened [the Notre Dame fire of 2019] is actually payback for neglecting one’s roots and moral values. Today the Old World is in decline”.²⁸

²⁶ Aleksandr Genis, “Yevropa nachinayetsya vo mne” [Europe Begins inside Myself], *Novaya Gazeta* no.125, November 13, 2015. Accessed September 10, 2020 via Integrum.

²⁷ Vyacheslav Kostikov, “V labirintakh ‘Edemskogo sada’ [In the Labyrinth of the ‘Garden of Eden’],” *Argumenty i Fakty* no.13, March 29, 2017. Accessed September 10, 2020 via Integrum.

²⁸ Nataliya Narochitskaya, interview by Vladimir Kozhemyakin, “Notr-Dam-de-Gori. Istoriik – o pozhare, stavshem simvolom krizisa Zapada” [Notre-Dame-de-Fiery (pun on the French pronunciation of Paris). A historian discusses the fire as a symbol of the crisis of the West], *Argumenty i Fakty* no.17, April 24,

These arguments, made with allusions to fallen empires and mythical lost realms, are expressed with the ominous sentiment that Europe is experiencing not merely obstacles, but a moral decline not unlike that which is commonly said to have occurred in the late Roman Empire before its collapse.²⁹

Additionally, this 'decline' is argued to be linked to the conceptual decoupling of Europe as a) a political entity and b) a distinct culture and civilization. In treating Europe as the EU as distinct from Europe as a civilization, the EU is in fact presented as *antithetical* to Europe as a civilization. An op-ed on the Russian Orthodox TV channel's website Tsargrad.tv elaborates what 'decline' means to Russian conservatives in candid terms:

The values of the modern European Union are not European values, but their negation. In fact, the EU has replaced the ancient millennial foundations of Europe with a cocktail of liberalism, feminism, LGBT activism and... anti-European "anti-colonial" rhetoric from the left. [...] The European Union is the main enemy of Europe today – more and more West Europeans recognize this.³⁰

The narrative built through this argument contends that Europe's cultural traditions (the article discusses the origins and development of European civilization at length before moving to this point) are being destroyed by liberal/leftist approaches to identity politics which challenge the Eurocentric default. In addition to identity politics, the texts frame "the absolutization of the individual, rational and legal as opposed to the collective and moral", the "ever greater repression" which Christianity is alleged to face in Europe, as well as the "millions of immigrants who seek not to assimilate, but to destroy European culture" as existential threats to European civilization.³¹ The prophesized end results of these threats are said to be war, loss of traditional family relations, and cultural degradation.

In this narrative framework of Europe's imminent collapse, the populist right emerges as a reasonable or logical reaction to Western Europe's perceived attempt at self-destruction. The themes of

2019. Accessed August 29, 2020 at <https://aif.ru/politics/world/notr-dam-de-gori-istorik-o-pozhare-stavshem-simvolom-krizisa-zapada>.

²⁹ The idea of moral and societal decline as having caused the fall of the Roman Empire was popularized by Enlightenment historian Edward Gibbon's 1776 *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; the trope of the decadent, declining empire has continued to fascinate the Western imagination since the romantic period. See Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: The Free Press, 1997).

³⁰ Yegor Kholmogorov, "Pochemu Rossiya – Yevropa, a Yevrosoyuz... ne ochen" [Why Russia is Europe, and the EU... not so much], *Tsargrad.tv*, August 21, 2019. Accessed August 25, 2020 at <https://tsargrad.tv/articles/pochemu-rossiya-evropa-a-evrosoyuz-ne-ochen-213564>.

³¹ Andrey Mozhukhin, "Pobedit' v sebe varvara" [Defeating the barbarian inside oneself], *Lenta.ru*, April 5, 2015. Accessed September 30, 2020 at <https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/04/05/veidle/>; Oleg Bondarenko, "Ideologiya 'russkoy vesny'" [The ideology of the 'Russian Spring'], *Izvestiya* (online), April 11, 2014. Accessed August 23, 2020 at <https://iz.ru/news/569094>; Yevgeniy Shestakov, "Yevropa teryayet identichnost'" [Europe is losing its identity], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* no. 8 (6876), January 18, 2016. Accessed September 28, 2020 at <https://rg.ru/2016/01/18/bezhency-site.html>.

rationalism and civil opposition to the loud ideological hegemony of liberalism used around right-wing populist movements work to legitimize the populist right and Euroscepticism, described as “understandable” and “natural” in the face of the threats to Europeanness from the left and foreigners.³² Though their identification as far right is not denied, the policies of politicians like Marine Le Pen’s National Rally are portrayed as reasonable. One op-ed written in the run-up to the 2017 French elections positively compares Le Pen’s foreign policy with the foreign policy of Charles de Gaulle, which was formative in France’s post-war history:

The main thing is that Marine Le Pen, like Francois Fillon, is trying to bring Gaullist features back to French foreign policy. And Gaullism was built precisely on the idea that France should play the role of a bridge between the West and East, maintaining constructive relations with both poles of world politics. Gaullism was and remains a pragmatic idea designed to enhance France's role in international relations.³³

The language used here is curiously more typical of liberal-international foreign policy discourse, invoking images of building stronger relations between different parts of the world through cooperation and exchange. Le Pen’s “constructive” interpretation of Gaullism, which “enhances” France’s international role, is implicitly contrasted with the confrontational, “Russophobic” mainstream French foreign policy egging on a dangerous “new cold war” with Russia.³⁴

More broadly, right-wing populists are argued to be attempting to “restore European identity”, whether by reviving older foreign policy approaches or by fighting back against too-liberal policies on migration.³⁵ Right-wing populists are discursively linked with Europe’s proud traditions and pitted against an EU that’s gone past the tipping point that ‘most people’ are willing to tolerate. The narrative built here is of conservatives as attempting to stop the cultural degradation of Europe and turn away from the “barbarism” of modernity in opposition to the “absolute value” of the Europe of the Middle Ages and Antiquity.³⁶

³² Oleg Bondarenko, “Ideologiya ‘russkoy vesny’” [The ideology of the ‘Russian Spring’], *Izvestiya* (online), April 11, 2014. Accessed August 23, 2020 at <https://iz.ru/news/569094>.

³³ Yevgeniy Osipov, “Rossiya kak soyuznik” [Russia as an ally], *Izvestiya* no.40, March 7, 2017. Accessed September 10, 2020 via Integrum.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Alexey Gryazev, “Merkel’ proigrala: pravyye delyat Yevropu” [Merkel lost: the right is dividing Europe], *Gazeta.ru*, June 26, 2018. Accessed September 27, 2020 at https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2018/06/29_a_11819977.shtml.

³⁶ Andrey Mozzhukhin, “Pobedit’ v sebe varvara”.

The Third Rome and the “renaissance of traditionalism”³⁷

If the values that represent Europeanness are contested in a battle of ideas between ‘real’, traditional Europe and liberal ‘anti-Europe’, the second representative of ‘real’ Europe in addition to right-wing populists is argued to be Russia. By repeatedly bringing up Russia’s relationship to Europeanness in the context of the EU’s crises, the two topics become discursively linked in these texts. Thus, the questions which frame the topic – what kind of crisis is Europe undergoing? What is the future of Europe? – are linked to other questions outside the topic – is Russia part of this Europe? Is Russia’s future in Europe? – which in turn shape how topic of Europe is constructed and understood by Russians. As one can tell by the temporal framing of these questions, they collectively relate to the ‘story’ of Europe, and the ‘story’ of Russia within that broader story seeking to contextualize the present moment within its past and future. Thus, these discourses construct and represent a narrative about Russia and Europe which answers these questions in a cohesive manner, seeking to emphasize certain parts of the webs that connect the two concepts of Europe and Russia such as to create a cohesive picture.

The woven narratives broadly contend that Europe has fallen from grace and turned away from its Christian, conservative, ‘real’ European values and traditions, while Russia has stayed true to them. A *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* editorial describes Putin through the eyes of right-wing populists as a model of conservative leadership and defender of traditional values;³⁸ elsewhere, the Tsargrad.tv op-ed from above bears the headline:

Why Russia is Europe, and the EU... not so much.³⁹

The Tsargrad.tv article, written by Russian nationalist Yegor Kholmogorov, suggests that because modern Europe has become so debased from its civilised origins as “old Europe”, Russia should not want to be part of Europe as it exists today.

The depiction of Russia in these texts contrasts starkly with the perceived chaos of the West. Russia lays claim to the concept of ‘old Europe’ as a symbol of Christian culture and traditional European values; a difference is thus made between ‘old Europe’ as a civilizational symbol, and ‘old Europe’ as a geographical entity describing Western European countries. Though discussing one is necessarily invoking the other, the texts attempt to decouple the civilizational aspect of ‘old Europe’ from the geographical one, such that the civilizational symbol of old Europe may be attached to another geographical entity that is not West European, namely Russia. In particular, Russia’s Christianity is

³⁷ Oleg Bondarenko, “Ideologiya ‘russkoy vesny’.”

³⁸ “Putin kak ikona yevropeyskikh konservatorov” [Editorial: Putin as an icon for European conservatives], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, March 29, 2017. Accessed August 23, 2020 via Integrum.

³⁹ Yegor Kholmogorov, “Pochemu Rossiya – Yevropa, a Yevrosoyuz... ne ochen”.

heavily emphasized in these texts, and the conversation about conservative values appears to center on religion. Here too, the metaphors and references are worth highlighting: Russia is described as Noah's Ark, and Putin as a "messiah".⁴⁰ Thus, the near-apocalyptic tones of the depiction of contemporary Europe are neatly contrasted with the images of moral virtue invoked about Russia. These texts play with references to Russian messianism and Berdyaev's "Third Rome" idea, whereby Russia (Moscow specifically, rising as the Third Rome after the fall of Byzantium)⁴¹ is said to have a spiritual destiny to redeem humanity.

Given these references to European history and claims to European culture, it is clear that many of these texts are more Europe-oriented than Eurasianist. Whereas Eurasianism argues that Russia should recognize and embrace its disconnectedness from Europe because of Europe's different political and cultural path from Russia, these conservatives seem to agree that despite Europe's political differences from Russia, and perhaps because of them, Russia should work harder to show that it belongs in Europe in cultural and historical terms. Many of these articles make direct references to the historical debate between Westernism and Slavophilism, and to contemporary Eurasianists, pointing out the flaws in their ideas and how they should be re-interpreted in the new context. The decoupling of the concepts of Europe-as-EU and Europe-as-civilization aids this argument, showing that Russia may also represent 'real' Europeanness even more so than the 'debased' EU's interpretation of Europeanness can. One *Argumenty i Fakty* op-ed says:

The number of people who believe that Russia is a European country is also growing, even though, it is only a trend. The poems of A. Blok, once so admired by our militant patriots and Slavophiles, worry our imagination less and less:

You are millions.

We are darkness and darkness and darkness.

Try it, fight with us!

Yes, we are the Scythians!

Yes, we are Asians

With slanted and greedy eyes!

⁴⁰ Yevgeniy Osipov, "Rossiya kak soyuznik".

⁴¹ Ana Siljak, "Nikolai Berdiaev and the Origin of Russian Messianism," *The Journal of Modern History* 88, no. 4 (December 2016): 737–39.

Fortunately, this Asiatic rhetoric is disappearing from our cultural life. For politicians, the time has come to say goodbye to it too.⁴²

Interestingly, the idea that Russia is Asian is said to “worry” the Russian imagination appears to reflect an anxiety about feeling inferior in comparison to the more ‘purely’ European countries to the west. In rejection of this worry, the narrative woven here is one of Russia embracing its European side while recognizing this is not intrinsically linked to its political orientation (the piece overall argues that anti-Americanism is growing in Europe, making it easier for Russia and Europe to have good relations). There is a sentiment that Russia is growing closer to Europe, not politically but simply in terms of its orientation and involvement with the continent: Vladimir Pastukhov, himself an academic based in the UK, argues that “Russia is not moving away from Europe, but rather approaching it”, trying to play the role of one of the great players in the European game.⁴³ Others argue “we are undoubtedly part of that [European] civilization, only very independent”;⁴⁴ this independence allows Russia to take a separate ‘path’ or have its own, independent story outside of Europe, without losing its sense of connection to Europe. One text suggests:

Russia chose another historical fate for herself. Had she continued on the course of 1990s, internalizing the norms of western legislation, inviting western banks, then the current conflict would probably not exist. On the contrary, Russia would have received all the support possible, but she would concede to losing part of her own sovereignty. But Russia chose a different path. She began to search for her identity not in common European values, but in national traditions, in her heroic history and in Orthodoxy. And thus, the Western elite soured on Russia.

This way of describing Russia as making choices for ‘herself’ (Russia is always feminine in Russian, but the translation choice here was done to emphasize how Russia is framed as a subject) acts to anthropomorphize and homogenize the Russian nation. It legitimizes the deliberate policy and discourse choices made by foreign policy actors, framing these choices as though they were unanimously made by the millions of Russian citizens speaking with one voice through the nation of Russia. The narrative constructed on the basis of this anthropomorphized Russia suggests that Russia

⁴² Vyacheslav Kostikov, “S Yevropoy ili shtatami?” [With Europe or the States?], *Argumenty i Fakty* no.39, September 27, 2017. Accessed August 23, 2020 via Integrum.

⁴³ Vladimir Pastukhov, “Pogloshcheniye Yevropy” [The Devouring of Europe], *Novaya Gazeta* no.127, November 18, 2015. Accessed August 17, 2020 at <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/11/13/66366-pogloschenie-evropy>.

⁴⁴ Nataliya Narochnitskaya, interview by Vladimir Kozhemyakin, “Notr-Dam-de-Gori. Istorik – o pozhare, stavshem simbolom krizisa Zapada”.

is part of the same European 'family' as EU countries, but has chosen a different path, like a child cutting off their family members for not respecting their boundaries. This different path is what allows Russia to construct its own 'story' while all the same retaining a connecting thread to the story constructed of Europe.

Conclusion

Morozov argues that "the only language that the Russian society has for self-description and for comprehending the world 'out there' is the language of European modernity"; even where 'traditional values' are meant to signal an independent path, they nonetheless define Russia in relation to Europe.⁴⁵ This argument, by which Eurocentrism permeates even anti-Western Russian discourses, is largely validated by the above analysis of conservative intellectual discourses about Europe. These discussions of Europeanness paradoxically distance Russia from Europe while simultaneously identifying Russia as European, which is justified by decoupling the common conflation between the EU as a political entity and Europe as a geographical and historical construct, and pitting one against the other.

Given that the institutionalization of a particular idea of Europeanness in the framework of the EU has legitimized the predominant interpretation of Europeanness oriented toward liberal democratic values, Russia's own attempts to legitimize itself as European necessitates de-legitimizing the institutions that situate it outside of the European club. Consequently, the reconfiguration of European identity toward an ethno-cultural or traditional mode is necessary for Russia to have a legitimate claim to Europeanness; indeed, based on Weber's three types of legitimacy,⁴⁶ Russia cannot appeal to legal-rational legitimacy of the EU, as it sits outside these structures and as a state defies international law, but it can appeal to traditional and charismatic legitimacy. The rise of the populist right has made this ethno-cultural mode more accessible and widespread in Russian and international discourses, challenging the predominant narrative within the EU about its foundational narrative as one of ever-progressing modernization and liberalization.⁴⁷ Instead, Russia has been able to appropriate the Eurosceptic discursive languages of choice and agency not afforded in the framework of the EU. Moreover, these discourses also challenge the dominant modernist narrative that civilization is linked to modernity and progress, instead arguing that civilization is a tangible,

⁴⁵ Morozov, "Aimed for the Better, Ended up with the Worst," 31.

⁴⁶ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, trans. G. Roth and C. Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 212–13.

⁴⁷ See Vincent Della Sala, "Narrating Europe: The EU's Ontological Security Dilemma," *European Security* 27, no. 3 (2018): 266–79.

immutable set of beliefs and traditions inherited from the past, which becomes ruined if modified, rather than evolving with time.

Overall, Russian conservative intellectual discourse on the 'European crisis' reflects the identity construction of Russia as European by its attempts to place the present moment in a narrative that gives Russia a special and valuable relationship to Europe. Whether texts represent Russia's reaction to the current moment in EU-Russian relations as undergoing its own crisis of identity or asserting its connection to European Christian tradition, the current moment is understood as pivotal for the stories of both Europe and Russia, and how their stories intertwine. Whether 'Europe is Ours' or 'Russia is Ours',⁴⁸ the trend appears to be moving away from Russian Eurasianism and isolationism in intellectual discourses, and toward a mutual identification of shared culture and history between Europeans and Russians. It is becoming increasingly clear that whatever part it plays, Russia has an important place in Europe's story.

⁴⁸ A think-piece published on the digital think tank website, Riddle Russia, inverted the "Crimea is Ours" meme formula to suggest that Europe is the one that should claim Russia as its own in light of Emmanuel Macron's statements on European renewal. Anton Shekhovtsov, "Russia Is Ours," Riddle Russia, August 7, 2019, <https://www.ridl.io/en/russia-is-ours/>.

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