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Russia

The Birth and Death of the “Russian World”: a History of the Concept

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[Addressing](#) the nation on the eve of the war, Vladimir Putin called Ukraine “an integral part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space”. From this statement follows a direct political-military conclusion: the borders of this “spiritual space” must fully coincide with the geographical borders of the Russian state. The idea to identify culture with army, state with language, and national identity with citizenship is known as the doctrine of the “Russian world” and has been progressively developed by the Kremlin over the past two decades. Today this concept is a cornerstone for justifying the war against Ukraine and denying the entire nation the right to exist. What is the story behind the concept of “the Russian world” and how did it emerge?

The term “Russian world” [appears](#) in the 1990s, within Moscow’s intellectual circles, as a response to the need for a broad cultural definition of Russian identity, which had to be different from its possible nationalist and revanchist definitions. However, having acquired a new meaning by the early 2000s the term gradually becomes the pillar of the official doctrine. In October 2001, at the so-called World Congress of Compatriots, Putin for the first time [sets out](#) his understanding of this doctrine: the “Russian world” consists of “millions of people who speak, think, and feel Russian” residing outside of the Russian Federation. Belonging to the “Russian world,” according to Putin, is deliberate; it is “a matter of spiritual self-determination. And since “Russia is making steady progress towards integration into the global community and world economy,” “our compatriots have every opportunity to help their homeland in a constructive dialogue with [its] foreign partners.” It is clear from Putin’s speech that at that moment he is more interested in those who “feel Russian” while living in London, Paris or New York than in those in Donbass, or Northern Kazakhstan. It is worth recalling that 2001 was Putin’s honeymoon with the West: Russia supports the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan, while liberal economic reforms are underway — among them programs aimed at attracting foreign investment. So far, the “Russian world” refers to wealthy and influential members of the diaspora who may serve as Russia’s competitive advantage in a globalizing world.

Even a year earlier, in 2000, Pyotr Shchedrovitsky, a political consultant with ties to the Kremlin, [defines](#) the “Russian world” as a “cultural and human source” in the global market. Supporting the concept of the “Russian world” as a hybrid “human/technology approach” Shchedrovitsky contrasts it to the Serbian model of “resolving territorial and ethno-cultural problems by force”.

By the mid-2000s, Putin’s Russia makes its way in the global economy and assumes the role of a major raw materials supplier — enhancement of its “cultural source” is no longer on a priority list. At the same time, the victories of the “color revolutions” in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2005 question Moscow’s political influence in the Post-Soviet space. The Kremlin’s reliance on informal networks with local elites clearly does not pay off, and the gradual alienation of the West requires advocacy work. Now the “Russian world” is fully determined by the political interests of the state: the Russian-speaking population of the neighboring countries is to become a tool for state influence, while sympathy for Russian history and culture (and in this specific sense, also sympathy for Russia as the successor of the Soviet Union) should be converted into support for its international politics. For this purpose, in the mid-2000s, the following projects are created: the *Russkiy Mir Foundation*, *RT (Russia Today)* news channel, the *Institute for Democracy and Cooperation* (a Moscow-based think-tank) and, above all, a new federal agency (so called *Rossotrudnichestvo*) backed up by the Cultural Center of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Each project has its mission in exercising Russian “soft power”: RT focuses on “alternative news”, challenging Western media and interpreting current events in a pro-Kremlin light, while the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation creates a network of conservative experts who see Putin’s Russia as a bulwark for “European values” against “leftist liberalism” and feminism.

The “Russian world” now not only applies to the international community of Russian speakers but signifies a set of

“values”, which are promoted according to the interests of the state. As Vera Ageyeva [put it](#), “securitization of the Russian world” is on the way: a situation in which cultural influence is almost integral to both “national security” and protection of the state from external threats. It is indicative that in 2008, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Alexander Burutin, [welcomes](#) the idea to create the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation and commends its role in “information warfares” targeted at “people and their attitudes”. This interpretation implies that the borders between “soft” and “hard” power are blurred, because the content of the “Russian world” — Russian language, culture, and emotional “connection to Russia” — becomes a weapon of sorts to use in an invisible war. For the Kremlin, the “Russian world” is only a response to the West’s expansion, which puts forth such concepts as “democratic elections” or “human rights” as a means of weakening Russia. Hence, it turns out that “values” as such, that is regardless of their content, cannot be of value, really: they are doomed to become a tool of national interests, serving either one country, or another. And while human rights activists or opposition members within Russia are proclaimed agents of the Western influence, those who identify themselves with the Russian culture outside Russia should become agents of Russian influence.

Following the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the conflict in Donbass in 2014, the “Russian world” no longer bears any traces of “soft power” and develops into an ideology of irredenta — a program seeking to regain country’s “historical territories”, which were lost — if not as parts of the Russian Federation, then at least within the orbit of its political and military control. As Patriarch Kirill, the head of Russia’s Orthodox Church, [explains](#) at the time, the “Russian world” is “a particular civilization, and people belonging to it today call themselves by different names — Russian, Ukrainian, or Belarus. Belonging to the “Russian world,” therefore, is not a matter of personal choice; it is predetermined by fate — by origin and territory. [According to](#) Kremlin strategist Vladislav Surkov, the “Russian world” is where people “cherish Russian culture, fear Russian guns, and respect our Putin”. In other words, being part of the “Russian world” means to be subjected to Putin, to recognize his authority and obey. One cannot think of a more concise formula showing total collapse of previous conceptualizations of the “Russian world” as “soft power”: Russia cannot simply be loved for its high culture, because no one finds its social and political model attractive; but it is able to incite fear with its military might.

For a whole decade, several organizations have been building the “Russian world”, and to no avail. To add insult to injury, they turned into a mechanism for embezzlement of allocated government funds. Even the Russian Orthodox Church is now morally bankrupt as millions of its parishioners in Ukraine turned their backs on it when the war began. Yet, the failure of the “Russian world” as a strategy of “soft power” is not only a product of corrupt practice. It follows from the anti-democratic vision of the state elites who are deeply convinced that people, at least those outside of the elites, are unable to master their own fates. The real “Russian world” — millions of those who speak Russian — is treated not as an equal in a dialogue, but as an “asset”; an asset to be managed and used to the benefit of the state. Today, this “Russian world” is literally a hostage and victim of the state waging a criminal war. It was the Russian-speaking Ukrainians who died under Russian bombs in Mariupol and Kharkiv or turned refugees. The Kremlin’s logic has degenerated into a terrifying formula: If the “Russian world” cannot be subjugated, it can only be destroyed. This means that if Russian culture and language have a future, it can only rise on the debris of Putin’s Russia.

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Source: the [new website](#) in Russian and English [Posle](#).

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