

## RUSSIA AS A *CIVILIZATION-STATE*: MAKING SENSE OF MOSCOW'S 2023 FOREIGN POLICY CONCEPT\*

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### Abstract

With the war against Ukraine, Russian foreign policy is going through a critical juncture that causes significant regional and global uncertainties. The current crisis is not a result of short-term brinkmanship but a consequence of Moscow's three-decade-long search for self-identification since the collapse of the Soviet Union. To follow the Kremlin's overall foreign policy trajectory and self-identification, Foreign Policy Concepts are quite helpful since they reflect the main framework of Russian diplomacy since 1993. The study begins by explaining the significance of the Concepts for Moscow's foreign policy. Then, it highlights the main themes of the latest Foreign Policy Concept: *anti-hegemonism, multipolarity, Russia as a centre, and Russia as a civilization-state*. In each section, Moscow's understanding of these themes is discussed and put into a historical context to explain the significance of their appearance in the official documents. The article then compares the previous concept to expose the change of narrative in 2023 to show the main changes in Russia's foreign policy priorities, articulation of other actors, and perception of threats.

**Keywords:** Russian Foreign Policy, anti-hegemonism, multipolarity, civilization, *fortress Russia*

*Bir Medeniyet-Devlet Olarak Rusya: Moskova'nın 2023 Dış Politika  
Konseptini Anlamlandırma*

### Öz

2022 yılından bu yana devam eden Ukrayna'ya karşı savaş ile birlikte Rus dış politikası önemli bölgesel ve küresel belirsizlikler yaratan bir yol ayrımından geçiyor. Mevcut kriz, kısa süreli bir maceracılığın değil bilakis Moskova'nın Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasından bu yana süregelen otuz yıllık kimlik arayışının bir sonucudur. Bu sürecin incelenmesi için, 1993 yılından bugüne kadar yayınlanan Dış Politika Konsepti belgeleri, Kremlin'in genel dış politika yönelimlerini ve kendisine dönük kimlik tanımlamalarındaki dönüşümün takibini yapabilmek için oldukça faydalıdır. Çalışma ilk olarak Konseptlerin, Moskova'nın dış politikası için önemini açıklanması ile başlamaktadır. Ardından, 2023 Konsept belgesinde öne çıkan temalar aydınlatılmaktadır: *anti-hegemonizm, çok kutupluluk, bir merkez olarak Rusya, ve bir medeniyet-devlet olarak Rusya*. Her bir temaya ayrılan kısımda, Moskova açısından bu kavramların anlamı açıklanarak tarihsel bağlamları verilmektedir. Çalışmanın bir sonraki kısmında mevcut Konsept, bir önceki Dış Politika Konsepti belgesi ile mukayese edilerek anlatıdaki değişim ortaya çıkarılmakta ve bu sayede Rusya'nın dış politika önceliklerinin, diğer aktörleri nasıl tanımladığının ve tehdit algılarının nasıl değiştiği gösterilmektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Rus dış politikası, Anti-hegemonizm, Çok kutupluluk, Medeniyet, *Kale Rusya*

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## **Russia as a *Civilization-State*: Making Sense of Moscow's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept**

### **Introduction**

With the war against Ukraine, Russian foreign policy is going through a critical juncture that causes significant regional and global uncertainties. The current crisis is not a result of short-term brinkmanship but a consequence of Moscow's three-decade-long search for self-identification since the collapse of the Soviet Union. To follow the overall foreign policy trajectory of the Kremlin, Foreign Policy Concepts are quite helpful since they reflect the main framework of Russian diplomacy. The study begins by explaining the significance of the Concepts for Moscow's foreign policy. Then it highlights the main themes of the latest Foreign Policy Concept: *anti-hegemonism*, *multipolarity*, *Russia as a centre*, and *Russia as a civilization-state*. In each section, Moscow's understanding of these themes is discussed and put into a historical context to explain the significance of their appearance in the official documents. The article then briefly compares the previous concept to expose the change of tune in 2023 to show the main changes in Russia's foreign policy priorities, perception of other actors, and threats.

### **1. How Socially Constructed Identity Shapes Foreign Policy: Constructivist Accounts on Russian Foreign Policy**

As for the theoretical framework, the study follows the constructivist approach of International Relations Theory. The rationale of this decision is based on the constructivist understanding of taking the concept of identity not as a default phenomenon but as a dynamic process that is shaped by actors' changing self-identification (Weber, 2010: 65). Governments as social actors cannot be examined out of the context of their normative meanings, in which they form their existence (Fierke, 2013: 190). The constructivist approach suggests that the interests of the states can be defined and redefined by ideational factors, including norms, ideas, and values; however, epistemologically, they are similar to those of the rationalist schools, which emphasize material factors (Katsumata,

2006: 3). The main difference lies in the assertion that material factors are perceived only through the lenses of the ideational factors (Alekseeva, 2019: 580). Hence, constructivism benefits both from the epistemology (method) of positivism and the ontology (theme/subject) of the post-positivist theories (Wendt, 2006: 182). Three principles of this approach are essential for this study: 1) social knowledge: actors interact with other actors according to their perception; 2) social practice: the significance of any act is a result of intersubjective relation between the actors; 3) identities and interests constantly change (Weber, 2010: 67).

Instead of a strictly defined theory, constructivism is closer to a “broad theoretical umbrella” that contains various vantage points concerning methodology, ontology, or understanding of fundamental concepts such as identity or culture (Bukh, 2009: 3). To categorize different *constructivisms* Hopf (1998: 181) offers the terms “conventional” and “critical,” both believing that “intersubjective reality and meanings are critical data for understanding the social world.” However, their main difference lies in their acceptance (or rejection) of contingent foundationalism. While the former considers “identities as possible causes of action,” the latter goes beyond that to expose the formation processes of identities (Hopf, 1998: 184). The conventional (or *thin*) constructivists tend to use a more pragmatic approach in their research (Carta, 2019: 83). For thin constructivists, states are the main actors of international politics that create the social world through the interaction between each other and the social world, in which their identities constantly get reshaped (Wendt, 1994: 385). Since the main aim of this study is to interpret and make sense of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 2023, the *thin* version of the constructivist fits best as the theoretical framework. It allows us to expose the role of identity formation in Russian foreign policy and track the changes by comparing previous strategic documents with the 2023 Concept.

Constructivist accounts of Russian foreign policy constitute a rich literature on International Relations. Feklyunina (2016) explores the relationship between collective identity and soft power through the constructivist lens in the case of Russia's policy towards Ukraine. Hopf (2013) conducted an extensive study to explore the concept of “common sense” with the Russian case through school textbooks, best-seller novels, and over a thousand texts of elites' public speeches. Tsygankov and Tsygankov (2021) explain how competing “identities” in Russia, namely, “Civilizationism,” “Westernism,” and “Statism,” have been shaping the foreign policy identity of Moscow. From the opposite angle, Morozov and Rumelili (2012) show how Russia has played the role of the *Other* in the process of identity formation of Europe. Similarly, Bukh (2009) explains the role of Moscow as an Other in Japan's self-identification in international

politics. Through a historical review, Sergunin (2016) discusses how the Kremlin's foreign policy reflects changing perceptions of the self. Makarychev (2014) shows Russia's changing security agenda by analyzing the official discourse and argues it is more of a "military-based defense thinking" instead of a more comprehensive security framework.

Considering the debates on "national identity" in Russian politics since the early 1990s, the frequent use of constructivist tools does not come as a surprise. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a search for identifying Russia's place in world politics began. Tsymbursky (1993) argued that the collapse of the Union was, in fact, isolating Russia from the territories that it civilizational links. Mezhuev (1997; 2003) also built his works upon the distinct Russian civilization and its relations with others. Markedonov (2006) argued that the survival of the Russian state was closely linked to its self-identification as a nation. A significant contribution from the debates on the civilization and identity of Russia was coming from the ideologue Dugin (2000), who emphasizes the "Eurasian concept of the Stateness of Russia."

The conservative concepts of the distinct civilization of Russia or its Orthodox identity originate in grassroots-level activism during the Soviet Union (Grek, 2023). Over time, the conservative narrative intensified and found a place in the elites' discourse. According to Tsygankov (2012), this was related to the Kremlin's changing stance towards the West. Melville (2019) asserts that the "neoconservative consensus" became the driving force after the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, and this narrative is a symptom of its prominence in Russian politics. Through a discourse analysis of the speeches of two top-level Russian officials between 2006-2020, Kragh and Umland (2023) show how the civilizational aspect intensified and strengthened over time. With the war in Ukraine, this narrative strengthened and became a part of the official narrative, as seen from Putin's (Kremlin, 2022; Valdai 2023) annual Valdai Club speeches. This brings us to the significance of the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept: although there were references to the themes of civilization-state, anti-hegemonism, or multipolarity, none of the earlier strategic documents of the Russian Federation was built upon these concepts. Therefore, this study argues that the 2023 Concept is the *formalization* of the decades-long civilizational narrative.

The study is designed on two components: a qualitative content analysis of the 2023 Foreign Policy concept and a comparative analysis with the previous Concept of 2016. The primary data of the research is the Concept of 2023; however, the previous Concept documents are also used to highlight the changes in the current document. The comparative approach lets us understand the main differences in Russian foreign policy and their reflection on the official narrative. For this purpose, after the detailed interpretation of the 2023 Concept, there is a

section for comparison with the 2016 Concept, which clarifies how Moscow's self-identification, perception of other actors, and even the geographical vectors in its foreign policy have changed since the beginning of the war against Ukraine. Additionally, primary sources, including the statements of officials and prominent experts on Russian foreign policy, are examined to provide a clearer picture of the Russian understanding of the examined phenomena, such as multipolarity or civilization-state. For the same purpose, secondary literature on ideas in Russian foreign policy is also studied.

## **2. Moscow's Foreign Policy Concepts Since the '90s**

Since 1993, the Russian Federation has released six foreign policy concepts, framing Russian diplomacy's general ideas, tasks, instruments, and vectors. Among other strategic documents such as the National Security Strategy, Russian Military Doctrine, or Information Security Doctrine, the Foreign Policy Concepts are crucial to comprehending the Kremlin's main issues in international relations. Moreover, tracking the differences between the concepts through time allows us to detect the evolution of Russia's self-identification.

According to Bogaturov (2007: 55), the first doctrine did not clearly define Russian interests but instead identified them as the same as the interests of other democratic countries. The main reason for this approach was seeing Moscow as a natural part of Western civilization (Tsygankov, 2016: 7). The Concept of 1993 clearly reflected this paradigm.

The Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 reflected the disappointment with the "democratic solidarity" with the Western countries. This was also affected by Yevgeny Primakov's impact on Russian diplomacy during the second half of the 1990s, which insisted on a balance through increased relations with non-Western powers. Another motive was to appeal to nationalist sentiments. The aim was to "soften the damage of the international processes from which Moscow was excluded" (Bogaturov, 2007: 59). The pro-Western approach of the early 1990s was criticized for being "one of the greatest geopolitical mistakes of near history." Instead, an alternative order in which Moscow preserves a prominent role was pushed.

The Concept of 2008, on the other hand, projected a more assertive and active Russian diplomacy. This reflected the self-confidence caused by the steady economic growth and political stability during Vladimir Putin's first two terms (Koldunova, 2020: 518). It is worth mentioning that the role of the administration and the prime minister in realizing foreign policy targets of the Russian

Federation was added to the Concept of 2008, highlighting the political weight of Vladimir Putin, who was preparing to change his post with Dmitry Medvedev (Bobrov, 2021: 47). According to de Haas (2010: 85), the 2008 Concept contained signs of Russia's reorientation from the West to the East with its emphasis on China, India and the CSTO.

The 2013 Concept, published during Putin's third term, was significant for containing the themes of civilization and Russia's uniqueness. As Tsygankov (2020: 151) explains, the concept saw cooperation with the Western actors possible. The 2016 Concept shows the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine Crisis and its harm to Russia's relations with the West. However, the bridges were still not burned since many articles of the documents kept referencing the will to continue the partnership.

According to Bobrov (2021: 64), the "view of the world order" is one of the fundamentals of the Russian foreign policy concepts. Since the 1990s, Russia has been pushing for a polycentric/multivoiced/multipolar world based on several centres of power representing their regions. And cooperation between those regions shall be operated in multilateral formats. In this order, Russia sees itself as a sovereign centre.

### **3. Foreign Policy Concept of 2023**

The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation from 2023 (hereon *the Concept*) was published on 31 March 2023 and divided into six sections: "General Provisions, Today's World, National Interests of the Russian Federation, Foreign Policy Priorities, Regional Tracks of the Foreign Policy, and Formation and Implementation of Foreign Policy." In each part, we can trace the themes of *anti-hegemonism, multipolarity, the central role of Russia, and Russia as a civilization-state*. This section explains these themes through their historical contexts and Russian political discourse, and then their usage in the Concept is examined.

#### **3.1. Anti-Hegemonism**

The anti-hegemonistic position in contemporary Russian foreign policy can be defined as rejecting any unilateral act of the USA. This idea existed already in the 1990s and has strengthened since then. Moscow had already started to express its discontent towards hegemony during the 1990s when Boris Yeltsin was president and Kozyrev, one of the symbols of the pro-Western policy, was the minister of foreign affairs. In 1995, then-president Yeltsin harshly criticized

the NATO strikes in Bosnia. This was followed by opposing the 1999 NATO air campaign in Kosovo. After the 9/11 attacks, Vladimir Putin expressed solidarity with the USA in its campaign in Afghanistan and even offered logistical support. However, this amicable tune ended with the circumvention of the UN Security Council by Washington to invade Iraq in 2003. In 2007, during the Munich Security Conference, Putin loudly expressed Moscow's rejection of the unipolar system (Putin, 2007). The anti-hegemonic stance reached another level during the global financial crisis of 2008, with the perception of liberal economic order coming to its end (Shakleina, 2017: 50). For the foreign policy concepts, the anti-hegemonistic tune first appeared with the Concept of 2008 with the criticisms of USA's unilateral actions (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2008).

The last straw for the Putin administration was the UN Security Council's resolution 1973 in 2011 on Libya. In 2011, the UN Security Council decision on Libya and the use of the term Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was criticized by Russian experts as a hegemonic instrument. According to Primakov, the resolution was interpreted as a means of de-escalation by the Russians while Western actors exploited it for transgressing on the principle of sovereignty and overthrowing Kaddafi in Libya (Primakov, 2012: 12). Then-President Dmitry Medvedev decided to abstain from voting, which paved the way for the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime. Putin, holding the post of prime minister, harshly criticized the decision. It has been speculated that Putin's differing view on the issue with Dmitry Medvedev was one of the reasons for not continuing the so-called *tandem* system and bringing Putin back to the Kremlin (Zygar, 2019: 249). After the fall of the Kaddafi regime in Libya, Moscow sought not to let a similar process emerge in Syria and supported the Assad regime. Anti-hegemonic discourse became even more visible after the 2014 Ukraine crisis. By defining Russian foreign policy as "norm-enforcing" instead of "revisionism," Richard Sakwa (2017: 104) argues that anti-hegemonism and rejection of unipolarity are not in parallel with the desire to replace the US in the current system but enhancing the UN system by activating its existent mechanisms. Hence, this approach is not pushing for building a new system but enforcing the norms that fit Russian interests. The key elements of this approach are limiting the expansion of anarchy and preventing the collapse of statehood (Timofeev, 2019). Romanova also asserts that Russia wants to change the world order in a way that best serves its point of view and interest but does not want to create a new order (Romanova, 2018: 88). According to Russian elites, unipolarity contradicts the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention (Kharkevich, 2016: 472). Therefore, these principles are the main norms enforced by Russian decision-makers.

The 2023 Concept clearly appeals to the hearts and minds of non-Western actors “that are subject to external pressure” (Concept, 12). However, the document assumes a unique role for Moscow against the hegemony by pointing out a historical continuity, starting from its role in the Second World War, the establishment of the international order around the United Nations, and its contribution to the decolonization process during the times of the Soviet Union. According to the Concept, this historical context provides Moscow with “a historically unique mission aimed at maintaining a global balance of power and building a multipolar international system” (Concept, 5).

It is argued in the document that this mission includes fighting against the remnants of the colonial era. These remnants appear as the unfair and unequal mode of the global economy, from which the former colonial actors have been benefiting” (Concept, 7). Based on that historical narrative, the Concept points out the USA as the centre of the current form of colonialism: “the vestiges of domination by the US and other unfriendly states in global affairs, create conditions to enable any state to renounce neo-colonial or hegemonic ambitions” (Concept, 19/1). It is argued in the document that today's world order cannot sustain its current form since it “lacks the prospect” to respond to the emerging international issues (Concept, 13).

The regional vectors mentioned in the Concept also refer to the anti-hegemonic approach. For example, Western approaches toward Africa are defined as “sophisticated neo-colonial policies.” In contrast, Russia’s policy is argued to be focusing on “supporting the sovereignty and independence” of the continent (Concept, 57). In a similar vein, Moscow’s relations with Latin American states are focused on assisting them in getting out of the American hegemony to secure their independence (Concept, 58). Not only the historical victims of colonialism but even the European states are warned about the dangers of the US hegemony, which is full of desire to hinder their sovereignty (Concept, 60).

Economic, societal, and legal tools are mentioned in the Concept when it comes to the instruments of the *US-led hegemonic logic*. The detailed economic tools include “uncontrolled emission and accumulation of unsecured debts” (Concept, 10) and exploiting their hegemonic position in the global economy (Concept, 39/1). The instruments for societal influence include “manipulation of the consciousness of certain social groups and entire nations” (Concept, 8). However, among the hegemonic tools, circumventing the UN system and instrumentalizing international law by the hegemonic powers are the most frequently criticized ones. According to the Concept, few actors aim to transform the world order into a rules-based order with their own interpretation, which best serves their interests (Concept, 9). In this context, the instruments for



manipulating the international system breach the principle of “non-interference in internal affairs” (Concept, 18/4).

The rejection of the “imposition of rules, standards, and norms” (Concept, 9) by hegemonic powers through the prism of their own interests and values can be traced by some specific examples. Climate change initiatives, for example, are argued to be politicized and designed to create an “unfair competition, interference in the internal affairs of states and limitation of the states' sovereignty in connection with their natural resources” (Concept, 41/2). Another example is the global challenge against drug trafficking, which has been mentioned in all of the foreign policy concepts since 1993. The 2023 Concept, however, also mentions the legalization of drugs for non-medical purposes as part of the narcotics problem (Concept, 32/1).

Moscow's proposed remedy against the current chaotic form of the international system is restoring “the UN's role as the central coordinating mechanism in reconciling the interests of UN Member States and their actions in pursuit of the goals of the UN Charter” (Concept, 19/3). To achieve the restoration, “the policy of double standards” (Concept, 18/5) should be abandoned, and “the UN should remain the main venue for progressive development and codification of international law” (Concept, 22). The target is creating a “more stable international security architecture” (Concept, 24). An effective UN Security Council and the prevention of its circumvention should be at the very centre of this proposed order (Concept, 8).

### **3.2. Multipolarity**

In addition to criticisms about the UN System, the anti-hegemonic stance affects Russian foreign policy in two ways: Russia's perception of other non-Western actors and the self-identification of Russia. From the first aspect, Moscow's perception of other non-Western actors in global politics makes multipolarity the ideal form of the international system. The second aspect concerns the Kremlin's self-perception as a centre in the upcoming order. This section examines the idea of multipolarity in the Concept.

Russian critics of the unipolar system assert that it is necessary to stimulate communicative action in international politics to create an alternative order (Kharkevich, 2016: 474). This alternative is established around the above-mentioned strengthened UN system and a multipolar disposition of the power centres that balance each other. The concept of multipolarity has been discussed among Russian elites since the 1990s. From the Russian point of view, the aim is not to replace the USA but to become one of the prominent centres alongside

emerging powers such as China and India (Timofeev, 2019). The main function of defending the multipolar order for Russia is to find support from non-Western actors on its anti-American position (Baev, 2015: 97). For this aim, Kremlin has been pursuing numerous intergovernmental and local initiatives: BRICS for solidarity among emerging markets; Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to advance cooperation in Asia; Greater Eurasia to converge Chinese Belt and Road initiative with Russia's integration projects with post-Soviet republics; Turn to East (*povorot na vostok*) to formulate Moscow's foreign policy on Eurasian vector. All these projects simultaneously serve the purpose of shaping the multipolar order with an advantageous position while advancing the process of a "cognitive act of de-westernization for Russia" (Savchenko and Zuenko, 2020: 113).

Multipolarity, as the opposite of the unipolar hegemony of the USA, is ubiquitously apparent in the text in various parts, and even the very ontology of this term is left ambiguous. It is implied that the emergence of multipolarity is in process, yet incomplete (*"the formation of a more equitable multipolar world is underway"* (Concept, 7)). However, this process is not progressing by itself but needs to be advanced, especially by Russia (*"Russia ... is... aimed at building a multipolar international system"* (Concept, 5)). On the other hand, in some parts of the Concept, multipolarity is understood as a phenomenon already existent, and the realities it pushes are something to be dealt with (*"these countries refuse to recognize the realities of a multipolar world"* (Concept, 8)). USA's hegemonic ambitions are considered the main obstacle to the process of becoming multipolarity (*"these countries refuse to recognize the realities of a multipolar world"* (Concept, 8)). The solution pointed out for overcoming this obstacle is the cooperation of non-Western actors. Their capability of achieving it is based on the ability to increase their weight in the international system (*"The sovereignty and competitive opportunities of non-Western world powers and regional leading countries are being strengthened"* (Concept, 7)).

According to the concept, maintaining multipolarity requires constant cooperation among its power centres. Therefore, Russia's policy of *Greater Eurasia*, *multipolarity*, or *Turn to the East* are parts of its worldview. Economic and political break from the Western actors has accelerated this process. Multipolar order, as understood by Russian experts, is not only about the interaction between the poles but also about the great power centres' relations with the regional actors around them (Vinogradov, 2019: 236). In this context, economic cooperation is one of the main pillars of multipolarity alongside solidarity against hegemony. Weakening the USA's global economic dominance is essential to Moscow's multipolar prospect. Easing the pressure caused by the financial sanctions through "new national and trans-border payment systems"

and using “international reserve currencies” (Concept, 10) other than the ones of the Western powers are the main instruments for this aim. According to the Concept, economic cooperation within the multipolar world order can only be sustained if it can be operated “independently from the unfriendly states’ international payment infrastructure” (Concept, 39/2). If the detriments of financial hegemony are the negative incentives (or sticks) for non-Western actors to pursue a multipolar order, the economic benefits are the positive incentives (or carrots). Suspicions of dependence on Western economic structures have been widespread in Russian circles since the 2008 global economic crisis. Therefore, the turn to the East was initially a hedging strategy to keep a distance from the negative “consequences of the crisis of economic globalization” (Concept, 39/1).

The Concept repetitively emphasizes “Russia’s position as one of the centres of the multipolar world.” The US, China, and India are mentioned as other centres. The Islamic civilization is also mentioned as one of the potential centres (Concept 56). Africa and Latin America are not mentioned as centres but as potential beneficiaries of the multipolar system (Concept, 57-58). Europe is also argued to be a potential centre if it can liberate itself from the US hegemony (Concept, 60).

Multipolar order, as the Russian view interprets it, will be composed of centres linked together with loose interactions, and Eurasia appears to be the main platform for that system. While the centre’s core is the domain that should be protected against interference from outside, like a fortress, Greater Eurasia is the platform of loose interactions for economic and political benefits. Eurasianism and Eurasian integration are frequently discussed topics in Russian foreign policy. However, distinguishing Eurasianism at the core from the Greater Eurasia projects is essential for making sense of the Concept. While the former is conducted through Russia-centered integrationist projects such as CSTO and EEU, the latter is pursued through relatively soft institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS. Regarding cooperation within the framework of the Greater Eurasia initiative, China is considered to be the most important potential partner. Especially the activities within the SCO aim to limit the USA hegemony (Unaldılar-Kocamaz, 2019: 140). Russian experts argue that deeper cooperation with China would soften the economic hit that Moscow took from the West (Torkunov et al., 2020: 16).

The Russian understanding of cooperation between the centres foresees loose interregional and intergovernmental interactions without any transfer of sovereignty. The primary concern is the risk of getting overshadowed by any actor, especially China, in addition to losing the grip on the core area of Russian interests. Although the Concept gives a perfect image of relations with China, many experts are pointing out the risks the partnership might bring out in the

future. For example, Krickovich argues that Beijing is using Moscow to balance out the US hegemony when needed without taking any hits by a direct confrontation (Krickovic: 2017: 299). Another risk is getting overshadowed by China and becoming a *little partner*. To challenge this risk, Russia pushed for the membership of India and Pakistan into SCO (Bordachev and Pyatachkova, 2018: 41). In any case, there is a perceived risk of experiencing an unequal partnership with China, similar to the one with Europe during the early 1990s. This risk is the basis of the emphasis on “Russia as a centre,” which is explained in detail in the following section.

### 3.3. Russia as a Centre

If the Russian understanding of the multipolar order is the outward-looking first aspect of anti-hegemonism, Moscow’s self-identification in world politics is the inward-looking second aspect. Russian elites see threats from the US-led liberal order, including mass protests in the post-Soviet area, economic pressure through sanctions, or the conflict in Ukraine. In connection to this, Russia established an anti-Western policy, which considers mass movements in the near abroad as hostile acts since they are seen as parts of the project to change of power in Russia (Primakov, 2012: 10). As argued by Baev, the 2014 war in Ukraine mobilized the Russian public to a resistance against foreign and domestic threats (Baev, 2015: 93). Such a perception paved the way of the idea of the *fortress Russia* which seeks to create a secure core around the country in the emerging times of chaos caused by the weakening of the international law, increase in the role of force in global politics, new arms race, terrorism, extremism, and such (Melville, 2017: 316). Nevertheless, some Russian experts, such as Kortunov, assert that the “neo-conservative consensus” around the idea of *fortress Russia* bears the risk of paranoidly cutting the links of the country to the outside world and warns that the *fortress* might turn the country into a *bunker* (Kortunov, 2022).

Signs of the idea of *fortress Russia* found a place in the 2023 Concept under the theme of “Russia as one of the centres of the multipolar order,” which is not a novel development regarding the fact that the Concept of 2016 was also considering Russia as a central power (Bobrov, 2021: 64). Similar to the discussion about multipolarity, there are unclear points about the definition and understanding of “Russia as a centre”: is that already a given fact or yet to appear?; is there a risk of losing the centrality for Russia? What are the spatial and/or political borders of the area of influence around this centre? For example, the concept argues that the USA undermines Russia’s central role with its activities “primarily aimed at complicating the domestic political situation”

(Concept, 24/4) or with tools “including those involving restrictive measures (sanctions)” (Concept, 26) and “interference in Russia’s internal affairs” (Concept, 59/2). Therefore, according to the Concept, the central position of Russia is to be defended whether it is a complete process or not.

The defense of this imaginary *fortress* starts beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. It reaches out to the post-Soviet area, which was “connected with Russia by centuries-old traditions of joint statehood” (Concept, 49). The task of securing this area includes direct military aspects such as “countering deployment or reinforcement of military infrastructure of unfriendly states” (Concept, 49/3) or “preventing and countering unfriendly actions of foreign states and their alliances, which provoke disintegration processes in the near abroad” (Concept, 49/6).

Bordachev and Pyatachkova (2018: 40) draw three circles around Russia to define the Eurasian region that is in the process of formation, and they argue that stability in the core circle is possible only if there is no threat from the peripheral ones. Nevertheless, the Kremlin's current foreign policy is devoted to enhancing this fortress as a core, which is to be built based on tight intergovernmental organizations such as the Union State with Belarus, the Organisation of Collective Security Treaty, and the Eurasian Economic Union. Allison (2018) highlights the function of these organizations in resisting the pressure from the West by providing a “protective integration.” This aspect finds its place in the Concept by mentioning the “colour revolutions” whether in Russia or its partners in the near abroad (Concept, 49/1). Because of this emphasis on preserving centrality in the near abroad, Russia is cautious about letting any actor that would counterbalance its weight in these organizations. On the contrary, it seeks to conduct interregional cooperation (especially with China) not as individual states but through the tight organizations of the core region. This approach secures Moscow’s central position and strengthens its bargaining power with other emerging powers (Skriba, 2016: 68).

### **3.4. Russia as a Civilization-State**

The emphasis on Russia’s defense against threats from the hegemonic powers or the influence in the CIS region is not novelties. However, as briefly discussed in the section about anti-hegemonism, the Concept repeatedly refers to the uniqueness of Russia as a civilization-state and the specific role world events caused by this uniqueness. According to this idea, in the Concept, Russia is not only considered a centre but also the core of the unique civilizational basin it represents. The civilizational aspect has been discussed densely in the literature. However, it was still unprecedented to appear this visibly in a foreign policy

concept until 2023. The narrative of the civilization-state is ambiguous and eclectic. It changes depending on the context and might refer to cultural (Russian language), ethnic (Russian world), religious (orthodoxy), or historical (Soviet/Imperial legacy) signifiers. In the Concept, the civilization-state is understood as a phenomenon that is bigger than the sum of its parts, which is a product of “thousand years of independent statehood, the cultural heritage of the preceding era, deep historical ties with the traditional European culture and other Eurasian Cultures” (Concept, 4).

The Concept contains all the points mentioned regarding the *uniqueness/distinctiveness* of Russia. For culture, preserving the Russian language is counted as one of the priorities of Moscow’s diplomacy (Concept, 43/2). This is a multifaceted concern for the Kremlin, which includes a plethora of debates, from the desire for a constitutional guarantee for Russians in Ukraine to the rights of Russian communities in Baltic states or the official use of the Cyrillic alphabet in Central Asian states. Since the start of the war against Ukraine, the Russian cultural legacy for humanity has been added to this list, with the debates about erasing Russian authors from books or banning Russian composers. This narrative functions as another argument for anti-hegemonism and *Russia against the West* through constant emphasis in the media about it.

The religious aspect of “civilization” includes defying any process that erodes “traditional Russian spiritual and moral values” (Concept, 59). The Concept refers to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which rose almost from scratch over the last three decades and became a significant factor in Moscow’s foreign policy. Acting as a significant soft-power instrument, the ROC has been quite active in the making of Russia’s foreign policy, frequently referring to multipolarity, civilization, or the Russian world (Blitt, 2021: 3). In the confrontation with Ukraine, the ROC has been maintaining a hard position concerning Kiev’s autocephaly. The Concept has a specific point about “ensuring the unity of Orthodoxy” (Concept, 43/4). In addition to its activities toward other Orthodox churches, the ROC maintained a strong position during Russia’s operations in Syria by arguing its role as the protector of the Christians in the Middle East (Adamsky, 2019). This idea continues in the Concept of 2023 under the section on anti-terrorism and protection of Russians abroad with a direct reference to providing security for Middle Eastern Christians (Concept, 31/7).

The historical legacy of the civilization-state, according to the Concept, brings responsibilities and missions for Moscow, the first of which is to maintain a “global balance of power and building a multipolar international system” (Concept, 5). Conserving the “traditional and moral values” of the country against “destructive neoliberal ideological attitudes” also comes with the package (Concept, 8). The historical aspect of the civilization is also a justification for

*fortress Russia beyond Russia* in the former Soviet geography, which preserves “centuries-old civilizational and spiritual ties” with Russia (Concept, 43/5). This task begins with resisting attempts to undermine Moscow’s role as the centre of its civilization” (Concept, 13).

Moreover, the Russian civilization-state has yet another *noblesse oblige*, which is to defend “universal and traditional spiritual and moral values and counter the attempts to impose pseudo-humanistic or other neo-liberal ideological views, leading to the loss by the humankind of traditional spiritual and moral values and integrity” (Concept, 19/9). This includes many recent political debates around LGBT rights, rejection of the legalization of narcotic materials, or degrading Christian values in Europe.

#### 4. Comparison with the 2016 Concept

In general, the Foreign Policy Concept of 2023 does not bring up any novel terms or ideas but prioritizes them as the main themes of Russian diplomacy. The idea of Russia as a unique State-Civilization has been widely discussed in Russian circles as part of the quest for defining the Russian identity. Conversely, multipolarity has been around since the disenchantment from the Europhilic trend of the early 1990s. However, what makes the Concept of 2023 significant is that for the first time in the Russian Federation, the main official document of Moscow’s foreign policy is built upon these concepts. In addition, in the past, these concepts were used in an eclectic way with other seemingly competing concepts and ideas, such as advancing cooperation with Western actors. In the current Concept, many such ideas or regional vectors have disappeared or changed due to the developments Russia has been experiencing. In addition to the emerging ideas discussed above, the change in these concepts and ideas is in the table listed below.

Theme	In the 2016 Concept	In the 2023 Concept
World Trade Organization	Regional integration under the norms and rules of the WTO (40/b)	Disappeared
Terrorism and Extremism	Articles 14/15 Mainly about the IS	Expanded to include Nazism and anti-Russian campaign
Civilization	More of a cultural term (22)	Signifier of Russia’s uniqueness

Responsibility to Protect (R2P)	Named and criticized (26/c)	Not mentioned directly but its essence is repeatedly criticized
Russian Orthodox Church	Mentioned once in Art. 38 among other cultural and religious activities of foreign policy	Mentioned 3 times, regarding its importance for foreign policy
Climate Change	Direct mention to Paris Climate Act (41)	Mostly similar but added a part about preventing its politicization for unfair competition (41/2)
World Health Organization	Highlighting the importance of the organization	Disappeared, however there is a statement on the politicization of international health initiatives
Council of Europe	Desire to continuation of the cooperation (67)	Mentioned as one of the unfriendly actors 59/2
OSCE	Highlights its importance for continental security (68)	Disappeared
Islamic Cooperation Organization	Highlights the importance of Russia's observer status in the organization (96)	Mentioned as one of the platforms to advance relations with the "friendly Islamic civilization" which has a "great prospect" of becoming one of the centres of the multipolar order (56)

Many countries and regions had individual articles focusing on their bilateral relations with Russia in the concept of 2016 have disappeared or grouped with other countries with the 2023 Concept: Ukraine, Georgia, Northern Europe (Scandinavia and the Baltics), Slavic nations, Canada, UK, Japan, Korean Peninsula, Australia and New Zealand, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan. The parts on Ukraine and Georgia are especially significant: Ukraine is mentioned only once as the medium of Russia's confrontation with the West but not as an actor. Georgia, on the other hand, is not mentioned in the text at all. Although Abkhazia and South Ossetia are repeatedly mentioned in the concept, the change in the context is worth mentioning: In contrast to the 2016 text, which prioritizes "strengthening their international recognition," the 2023 text aims at their "integration with Russia." UK, Australia, and New Zealand are also grouped under the term "Anglo-Saxon states," highlighting their role as part of the hegemonic rule of the USA. Instead of the term "Slavic nations," the new



Concept prefers the “Russian world,” referring to the civilizational ideas discussed above. Moscow’s close Muslim partners with individual articles in the 2016 concept, Syria and Iran, are grouped with other countries from the Islamic world, such as Türkiye, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

## Conclusion

The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation clearly shows Moscow’s self-identification in world affairs. According to the document, US hegemony is the main threat to non-Western actors in today’s politics, and the remedy for this problem is establishing a multipolar world order under the UN structure. This new order shall be a reflection of the balance between the “centres of the world,” one of which is the Russian Federation. In this context, Russia has a historical obligation to advance this project by pushing forward the non-Western cooperation. Securing the central position of Moscow in this narrative is a priority and goes beyond the official borders of Russia. Moreover, the Concept defines Russia as a “unique civilization-state,” referring to the country’s cultural, religious, and historical distinctiveness. These themes are in accordance with the current stance of the Russian Federation in global politics, which is a combination of a total confrontation with the Western powers and simultaneously tightening links with non-Western actors.

With the war against Ukraine since 2022, this situation has reached an irrecoverable point. That is the main reason for the formalization of the civilization narrative in an official document, in contrast to the previous foreign policy concepts that expressed the desire to re-establish partnership with the USA and its allies despite all the disputes. With the formalization of the more confrontational narrative in the 2023 Foreign Policy concept, it is fair to argue that the bridges have officially burned with the West, and Russia’s quest for strengthening non-Western cooperation will accelerate. In Moscow’s desired order, this non-Western cooperation will work within the UN system, and the focal point will be to preserve the principles of non-intervention and sovereign equality. However, the emphasis on the *centres* implies that the multipolar order will be based on the main power’s interests instead of fully implementing these principles to all actors. In accordance with this strategy, the Russian Federation will prioritize establishing effective yet flexible links with other *centres* while focusing on deeper integration in the *near abroad*, which it regards as part of its civilization.

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